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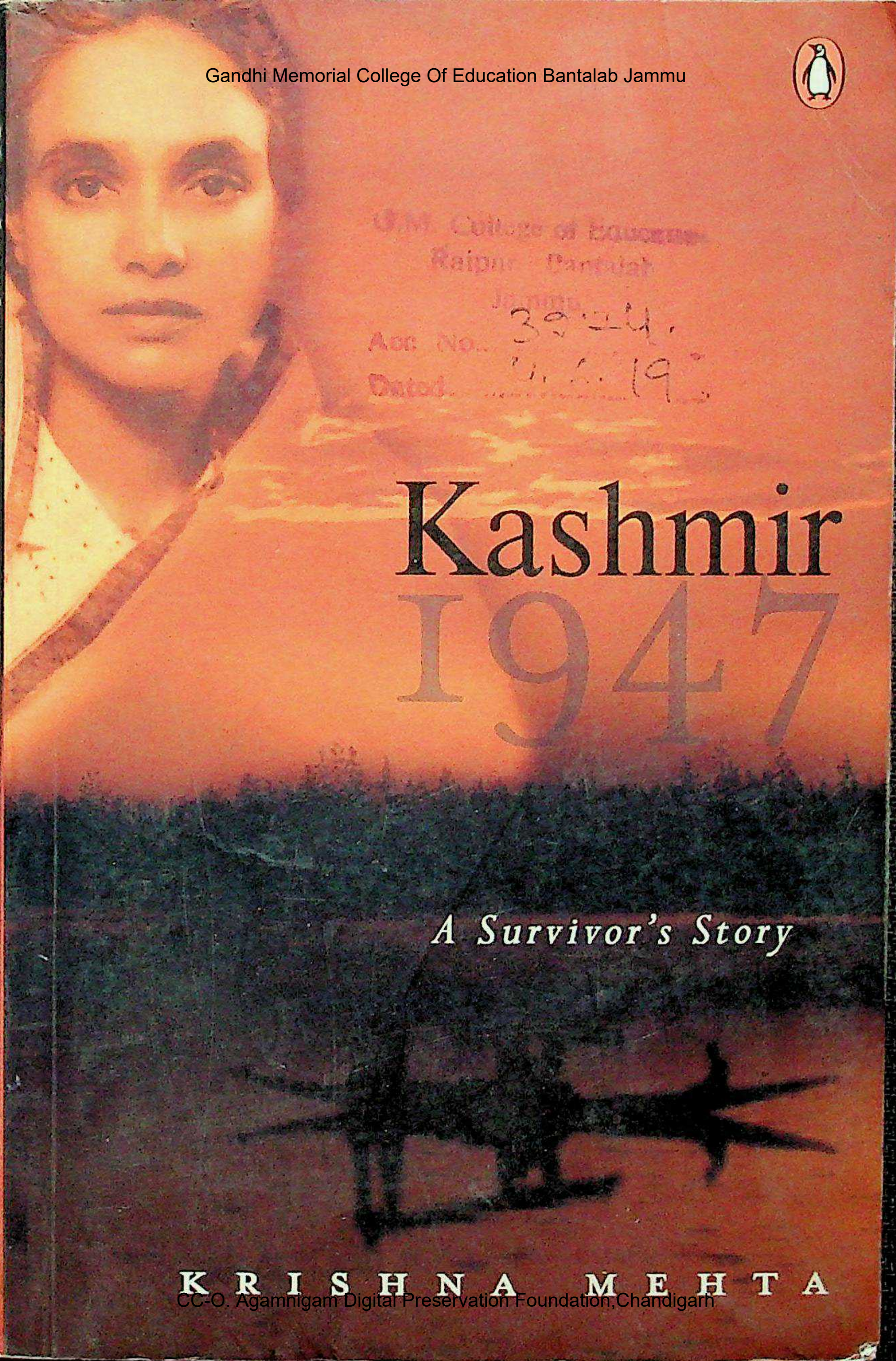


G.M. College of Education
Raipur Bantalab
Jammu
Acc. No. 3944.
Dated 4.6.19

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Gandhi Memorial College Of Education Bantalab Jammu

Dr. N. L. Zutshi

2011

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Jammu.
Acc. No. 3274 (D)
Dated 4.6.19

PENGUIN BOOKS
KASHMIR 1947

Krishna Mehta (1913-1993) was a direct descendant of Col. Basti Ram, who helped annex Ladakh and later became its governor. She was born in Kishtwar, a small, sleepy town in Kashmir on the banks of the Chandrabhaga (Chenab) river. She married Duni Chand Mehta, a civil servant of Jammu and Kashmir and wazir-e-wazarat of Muzaffarabad. During the raid on Kashmir in October 1947, Duni Chand was shot dead while on duty and Krishna was taken prisoner along with her young children.

She and her children eventually found their way to a refugee camp, and from there to Delhi. She so impressed Pandit Nehru with her sincerity of purpose that he felt impelled to call her his sister. With his help and support Krishna established the Gandhi Seva Sadan and Women's Welfare Centres for the socio-economic development of the disadvantaged women of Kashmir. She nurtured both these institutions and they prospered rapidly. She was nominated to the Lok Sabha as the first woman MP from Kashmir. A disciple of Magan Baba, Krishna was also associated with Dr Dinshaw Mehta's Society of Servants of God where she launched the Needs of Life Movement and secured government approval of Naturopathy as an alternative medical practice.

Krishna Mehta travelled extensively, both in India and abroad, and brought into her work and writings the rich and varied experiences of her travels. She lived a rich and fulfilled life. When she passed away at the age of eighty, her ashes were immersed in the Chandrabhaga river at Kishtwar in accordance with her wishes.

WITH LOVE TO
HINDU EDUCATION SOCIETY KASHMIR
FROM :
DR. N.L. ZUTSHI, Mumbai

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# Kashmir 1947

## *A Survivor's Story*

KRISHNA MEHTA

PENGUIN BOOKS

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PENGUIN BOOK
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi 110 017, India
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Group (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in Hindi as *Kashmir per Hamla* by Sasta Sahitya Mandal, Govt. of India
First published in English by Signet Press, Calcutta 1954
Published by Penguin Books India 2005

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

ISBN 10: 0144 000172 ISBN 13: 9780144000173

Typeset in Sabon by S.R. Enterprises, New Delhi
Printed at Chaman Offset Printers, New Delhi

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# THE GATHERING STORM

In the north-west of Kashmir, near the border, lies Muzaffarabad. Before the tribal raids it formed part of the state of Kashmir. Surrounded by mountains, this district lies across the river Krishna Ganga and is covered with verdure. A road from here leads up to Rawalpindi and another to Abbottabad, in Hazara district; both these places are in Pakistan. The inhabitants resemble the people of the Punjab. Rich or poor, they are hardworking and simple, often handsome and generally well-built. The district used to be administered, on behalf of the state, by a *wazir-e-wazarat* (district commissioner), and with him there were several other officials—a sub-judge, an assistant inspector of police, an engineer, an assistant surgeon and a divisional officer of forests, as well as a colonel with a company of soldiers under him. This is how the place was administered before Partition.

In July 1947, the Kashmir government sent my husband, Shri Duni Chand Mehta, to Muzaffarabad as wazir-e-wazarat. Until then he had been the assistant governor of Srinagar. I could not go along with him as I had to stay back to look after some guests. After about a month, he had to come to Srinagar on official work. On his way back, he took the children with him and asked me to join him later when our guests left.

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A week later, I was in Muzaffarabad. The place was not unfamiliar to me, but on this occasion I somehow could not enjoy being there. I was filled with a vague fear of my surroundings, though I did not quite know why, and felt like running away from the place. I was so depressed that I did not even unpack the luggage. 'We have to get away from here and go somewhere else,' I often told my husband. 'We won't stay here. I shan't unpack.'

My husband was then so busy with his work that he hardly had time to talk to me. Along with the colonel, he constantly rushed about from one part of the border to another, from village to village, and he did not even drop me a hint that anything untoward might happen any moment. After some time, they began to erect fortifications on the hillocks in front of our bungalow. Our bungalow was on the crest of a small mound with open space around and a garden in front. The garden and the bungalow were surrounded by a fence made of wooden planks. The assistant inspector of police lived in a bungalow very near ours, while the hospital and the doctor's bungalow were about two furlongs away with a mosque nearby. On the other side of our bungalow there was a Muslim shrine on the edge of a dense forest. A narrow bridle-path through the hillock led to the shrine from our bungalow, but people hardly ever used it. Occasionally, a lonely dog walked up the path in search of prey, and one could hear the screech of vultures and owls.

On the third day after I came to Muzaffarabad it was the festival of Janmashtami. Everyone in our home was fasting, and in the evening I went to the temple, my servant carrying with me the offerings and flowers for the deity. At the gates of the temple he stumbled and

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dropped the plate of offerings. It fell with a clatter. Immediately I felt that this was a premonition of dark days ahead, and for two whole days I could think of nothing else. But within a few days I gradually forgot all about it.

But strange things happened that month. For one thing, there were a number of snakes about the house, and all of us were on edge and generally nervous. Sometimes these were discovered inside the children's swings, sometimes on the badminton court, and one day, a snake fell on the faces of two of our peons while they were asleep. Fortunately, it did not bite them. Death seemed to be coming at us from all directions. I prayed every evening with my children, and I was so happy while praying that I wished I could pray all the time.

I considered mine an ideal home and I was never bored looking after it. Of course, like everyone else, we had our difficulties, financial and otherwise, but these never worried me; I felt that my husband could always find a way out. We knew that nothing happened in our home that we had to be ashamed of. Although my husband was in an important position, we led a very simple life. No bribes ever came to our house, nor anything gratis. Often he would tell me, 'I am not rich. My children have been brought up on money earned by the sweat of the brow. Don't you think we should try to inculcate in them the ways of a simple life? That, indeed, will stand them in good stead. A life of luxury ultimately becomes a burden on man.'

Under his care the children grew as he would like them to be, but I could not discipline myself to a simpler life while he was with us. Being the first-born child of well-to-do parents, I grew up in comfort and affluence. Brought

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up with servants and maids all around, I had developed the natural instincts of aristocracy. At my father-in-law's house, I tried for a time to live up to my husband's ideas and learn to forbear and accept, but my efforts to discipline myself did not succeed. The desire to lead the hard life was there, but I just could not bring myself to live it, and my helplessness often reduced me to tears.

I was still restless about being in Muzaffarabad. I told my husband, 'I should like to go to Srinagar for a few days. The children can stay on here. I shall be back soon.' At first he agreed, then he changed his mind. 'Don't go just yet. I want to ask some army officers over for a meal. Don't you think you could go after that?' he asked.

Some more days went by and then one day, just after coming home he said, 'Do you know? The colonel suggests that we send the children away to Srinagar and ourselves shift to his place. He lives in Domel, and says that we shall have the use of several jeeps and a telephone there if we needed them in an emergency.'

'Did you agree to go?'

'Oh, no! I told the colonel that I have orders to forbid people to leave Muzaffarabad and therefore I can't very well send my own family away. If there is trouble, my family will have to face it as much as the others. I don't wish to do anything against my sense of duty.'

I was rather pleased to hear this and felt a deep and secret reverence for my husband.

'I think you are right, dear,' I told him. 'You should be firm about it. May He bless us, Who blesses the just.'

Though Muzaffarabad was right on the border, it was quite undefended due to the carelessness of the rulers of the state. Not to speak of other things, there was not

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even a telephone for sending messages in an emergency. But there was this order that none should flee from the city in fear!

From all that I heard, I concluded that people were expecting something to happen. My husband obviously knew all about it. Usually he never kept any secrets from me and I always shared his thoughts before he decided anything. We never had any quarrels between us as I never did anything against his wishes. Nor did he find it necessary on all occasions to tell me what to do and what not to do. Our mutual understanding was both complete and instantaneous. He always looked quiet and composed, but lately he had begun to frown a little. He did not however tell me what was afoot and I was becoming a little uneasy and worried. This was probably due to overwork and exertion, I thought. But he seemed as keenly interested in gardening as ever and kept himself busy planting vegetable and flower seedlings. He also took a lot of trouble about cooking and was a great help to me in the kitchen.

On 21 October 1947, the colonel, the captain and some other military officers had been asked to dinner. It was drizzling that evening and it was quite cool. The clock struck ten but no one had yet turned up, although all of them lived quite close by in the bungalow of the superintendent of police. I had cooked the meal myself, so the disappointment was all the more keen. When I sent them a message, we were told that the captain had set out somewhere in a jeep, and that they would all come as soon as he returned. The captain had gone to reconnoitre the border. He came back with the report that everything was all right.

After dinner, when all the guests had taken our leave, my husband went to his bedroom. It was already midnight,

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yet he called all the children there and began playing rummy with them. I also could not keep myself aloof, and joined the game. Then he asked for some tea. What was he up to, I wondered. I did not feel like having tea, but he insisted and said, 'Please have some tonight, dear. Nobody will be there to ask you tomorrow and then perhaps you will regret refusing me tonight.' I was very put out at this and my heart began to beat faster. I threw the tea away because something fell in it. I kept on asking him again and again, like one possessed, what it was all about. What, indeed, was it all about?

'Oh, nothing at all! Just something that I said without really meaning anything.'

His tone was ostensibly nonchalant, but I was anxious and worried. I could not go on playing rummy any more, so we finished the game. It was quite late at night and the children went to their rooms to sleep. My husband asked me to bring the baby, the the youngest of our seven children. He was very fond of the little boy and he said, 'Ah! Look at this darling, how soundly he sleeps!'

Worried by his strange behaviour, I remained silent.

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## THE STORM COMES

I woke up with a start at about five in the morning and heard loud reports of firing reverberate against the hills. I rushed to my husband's bedside and tried to wake him up, but he was sleeping so soundly that it took me some time to rouse him from sleep. I told him that the attack had begun and that he must get up. Actually I had not heard anything about an attack; in a split moment an unconscious fear had burst forth into expression.

He turned over in his bed and said, 'This is not the attack. Our own army must be practising target-shooting.'

'How do you know? Did the colonel tell you last night?'

'Not exactly.'

'Oh, then be sure it is the attack. Please get up. What are you brooding on? Don't you see they have come?' Even then he would not believe that it could be the attack. Finally, when he saw that our bungalow was being shot at and the wooden fence was being drilled with bullets, he jumped out of bed. Quickly he dressed himself and prepared to go out. I asked him to be careful. His answer was brief, 'No bullet ever hits me.'

With my children, I went out to the veranda and looked in the direction from which the bullets came. I could see no one, but the firing continued uninterrupted. Some bullets tore through the planks of the fence and reached the

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bungalow, but all this did not frighten the children at all. They laughed it all off loudly. There had been a drizzle the previous night, and it had now become rather chilly. So I asked the children to get dressed. Both my sons, Suresh, who was seven, and twelve-year-old Vimal soon ran back to the veranda. One had put on a bush shirt and the other a sweater. But in their haste and scramble they had forgotten their shoes. All the four girls had also run out to watch the fun. Among them was my husband's niece. She came to live with us at Srinagar and had come over with us to Muzaffarabad. She was fourteen, and we called her Swadesh. My eldest daughter Veena was fourteen and a half, Sheela was ten and Kamlesh, the youngest, was nine. All these innocent children burst into peals of laughter at the sound of the firing. I do not know why, but strangely I was not upset by it either. But when the firing did not show any sign of ceasing, I had to ask the children to get inside the house. They did not of course listen to me and teased me for being timid and faint-hearted.

While we were still on the veranda, the sub-inspector of police, with twenty-three sepoys, joined my husband in the compound. Of the sepoys, twenty were Muslim and three, Hindu. The sub-inspector was a Hindu Rajput. He informed the wazir-e-wazarat that the attack had begun. The enemy had already crossed the Krishna Ganga bridge and was now approaching the city. When my husband came in, I asked, 'Why don't you go to Domel and call for troops?'

'Let the firing subside a little, then I shall go to Domel.'

That was the last time I ever set eyes on him. As he was going out he looked at the children and laughed, 'Won't you give them tea today? Just look at them! They are not

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one bit afraid. They are supremely unconcerned. They are remarkable children, I must say!' Yes, he was happy.

When I looked up again, he had gone. And he never came back.

Most of the servants were not in the house when the firing began. Only Om Prakash, an old and faithful servant, was with us. Panic-stricken people were running all over the city, weeping and wailing. All this naturally unnerved us, and soon someone came in and announced that the raiders had reached the hospital and set it on fire. They were burning everything they could get hold of. The helpless patients were going to be burnt alive. It was terrible. The hospital was very near our bungalow. I led the children to one of the inner rooms. The kitchen was at the back, and beyond it, our little shrine. From it a door opened on the path which led to the Muslim shrine. On a sudden impulse I took off all my jewellery and tied them up in a bundle. The clothes I had on were old and not enough to keep me warm, but just at that moment I could not think of wearing something heavier.

I had hardly gone inside when someone exclaimed that the superintendent's bungalow was in flames. I could not decide what to do next. Then I heard one of my Muslim peons knock at the back door. He was panic-stricken and cried out to me, 'What are you doing here? The raiders are trying to break through your bedroom and you tarry? There are about sixty of them, do you hear? Come out of the house with your children. We will hide them away somewhere on the way to the shrine.'

I was quite confused. 'Where is Mehtaji?' I asked.

'He is all right; he has gone to the front. Do hurry up, please.'

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I could not make up my mind. My husband was out doing his duty. And I was not sure whether it was right for me to leave the house when he was away. The peon got impatient with my indecision.

'Please hurry, soon there will be no way out. They are burning and killing all the way.' I could not stay on any longer. Snatching up a bedcover and a *guptee* (a sword-stick), barefooted, I rushed out of the house along with my children. Everything we had we left behind. I took the guptee with me so that if there was any danger of molestation, my children could kill themselves with it.

We walked towards the shrine. For a moment I looked back lingeringly at our house; a forlorn and deserted look had already come over the place. How comfortable I had been in it, I thought with gratitude. Significantly, darkness was gathering round this forlorn habitation. It was highly symbolic of the unknown future in store for us.

The shooting continued and it was deafening. We stumbled and groped all along the way. Any mistake, and all that would remain of us would be food for the vultures.

Then it began to rain heavily. We could not go on and stopped to rest on the grass. We were soaked to the skin and the children began to shiver. I covered them with the bedcover and the poor things huddled together under it.

It seemed that we had come nearer the shooting. I was sitting, most desolate and depressed, when an old servant from the hospital came running towards me. I knew something was the matter.

'Why are you so upset?', I asked.

'My twelve-year-old son was in the hospital. He is now being burnt to death. All of them are being burnt to death! All of them are being burnt alive! Oh, my God! My God! How am I to find my little son?'

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He ran towards the hospital. We heard the story later. His corpse was found lying near the hospital and in his lap was the charred body of a little boy.

For over two and a half hours we lay there. It was so cold that the children had gone pale. Meanwhile, Om arrived there. He had been searching for us all the time and was weeping.

'Where have you been, Om? You are weeping?'

The children were amused and tried to cheer him. 'Hullo Om! You so faint-hearted? See, we are not at all afraid. Didn't you tell us that you weren't afraid of any one or anything? And now you forget yourself!'

But Om did not reply. I asked him again, 'Won't you tell me what has happened? Why are you weeping so, Om?'

He hesitated a little before he spoke. 'I was still in the bungalow when you left. Sixty tribesmen broke into the house and carried away all the jewellery and the clothes.'

'Is that all you weep about? Bhai, after all it was we who collected the jewellery and the clothes. If we live long enough, we will do so again. But would you do me a favour? Could you go to the bungalow and fetch the saheb's warm suit? He went out in the morning with nothing very warm on and he must be feeling cold now.'

He sighed deeply and left. But very soon, he was back.

'I just can't get in. I heard some one groaning inside.' It was obvious that he did not want to say anything more.

It struck me that what he did not say was more ominous than what he did say. I turned round and looked in the direction of my bungalow. Good Lord! It was burning! The peon who was with us also noticed it. 'There! Your house is on fire.' Kamlesh also cried out, 'Mother! My doll's house must be burning, and all the helpless dolls

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with it. Can't we save them?' The innocent child was still living in the world of dolls.

It was staggering, looking at that house going up in smoke. What was I to do? Where was my husband and what was he doing? Where could I take these children? I was tired of brooding and my mind wandered around. The children looked at me and were not comforted by the look on my face. They seemed to have developed an instinct that told them what was happening in my mind.

The peon suggested, 'Mataji, we must get away from here. I shall take you all to a safer place, otherwise these children will freeze to death. What can we do if the raiders turn up? We must leave this place at once.' It was a sad thought that we had lost everything, and we were all in for further trouble. We did not even know what the future was going to be like. Barefooted, the children walked on; time and again they turned round to look at the burning house—now turned into a mass of flames and smoke.

On the way, we saw a group of ten or eleven people coming towards us. They stopped Suresh, who was leading our group, and wanted to know who his father was and where he was going.

It was not safe to tell them that he was the wazir's son, but he had always been told to tell the truth. And he hid nothing.

'Oh yes. Then hurry up, sir. Wazir saheb has made arrangements for all of you to stay with Nawaba.' Nawaba was the peon of the tehsil and all we could do was stumble along the way to his house. His house was about half a mile from ours and was on top of a piece of high ground; from there you could get a good view of the entire city.

His family and the other Muslims who had taken shelter in his house received us warmly. They said, 'You

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are the wife of our officer. We have just as much regard for you as for him. Please look upon this as your own house and make yourself at home.' When I went inside the house, women were moved to tears at the plight my children were in. I asked them for news of Mehtaji. But it seemed as if they were rather indifferent as to what might have happened to him. Soon after, Shiva Dayal, the orderly of the superintendent of police, arrived there. He belonged to Baramula and often used to come to our house. He whispered something to Om. I asked him if he knew where Mehta saheb was.

Mehtaji had gone in the direction of the high school along with the saheb (superintendent of police). He was safe with the soldiers around him; they had had a cannon fixed to defend themselves, so he told me.

The children were shivering. Nawaba's wife lit a fire. I dried the children's clothes over it.

The sky was overcast with smoke. I felt as if the end of the world had come. Neighbouring people had lost everything they had, and many were streaming into Nawaba's house for refuge. I became quite desperate trying to find out about my husband. I asked everyone if they knew anything. They gave all kinds of conflicting reports. I heard that the raiders were killing the men as they came, carrying away the women, and after they had plundered the houses clean and bare, were setting fire to them for fun.

It was 4 p.m. and the children had not had anything to eat; they were very hungry. The lady of the house then baked a roti of maize and gave it to them. I divided it into six pieces and distributed them among the children.

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# FROM PILLAR TO POST

We sat up till 10 p.m. when Nawaba walked into the house. He called his wife aside and whispered something to her. She came back and announced that we had to leave the place immediately. 'I am sorry, but you can't stay on here any longer. The raiders are sure to come here and then all of us will be killed for having kept you so long.'

'But where can I go, on a dark night like this? I know no one around here.'

But she paid me no attention. Her husband also joined in and said, 'Please leave and leave at once. Both the wazir saheb and the superintendent of police have left for Uri in a jeep. We can't keep you.'

I felt that this was a lie. 'I am sure this can never be. It just can't be true. He can never run away like this leaving us behind.' But Nawaba swore by the Holy Qur'an and insisted that he had spoken the truth.

Earlier in the day, when I had arrived there, they had eagerly offered to put me up; they had even treated me with respect. Now, at night, they wished to turn me out. I could not help being distressed by their strange change of attitude. I knew I was helpless; there was nothing much that I could do.

'Well, if you think that it is not safe to keep us, I shall leave, come what may. I don't intend to get you into trouble.

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I shall leave, but on this condition that you escort me to my chowkidar's house.' This chowkidar was a Muslim and he was a kind man. His house was quite far away from Nawaba's, but Nawaba agreed to take me there.

'All right. I shall go with you to Jogiyan ka Gaon. The village headman there will take you to the chowkidar's in the morning.'

Jogiyan ka Gaon, I knew, was notorious for its goondas. Nawaba's tone was also not very reassuring. Was he up to some mischief? I asked Om and Shiva Dayal to come along with me. The peon who had rescued us from the bungalow also came with us.

The path was hilly and strewn with thorns and stones. One false step would have been fatal. Every now and then the cries of wild beasts pierced the darkness. We saw the burning town silhouetted behind us and heard the muffled sound of shots.

I walked at the end of our small caravan. We climbed up a steep ascent and arrived at some sort of habitation up the hill. The man who lived there turned out to be one of Nawaba's relatives.

'Could we stay here till dawn?' Nawaba asked him.

Fortunately, the man did not refuse. The children were so tired that they could not have walked another step. All this while, the poor things had been shivering in the cold; and to make matters worse, their clothes were still wet. Their teeth were chattering.

We were given a bed and a quilt. The children got a big roti of maize flour. At first, I did not feel like accepting it from our host, but I was oppressed by the children's hungry looks. What else could I do but accept? After the 'dinner', they went off to sleep. I also lay down near them. The

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quilt was very dirty. In better times, we would not only have thrown it away but would have also had the place thoroughly disinfected. But now we were most grateful for having it.

I looked around the room. Several sharp-edged spears were dangling on the wall. Looking at them, I got very nervous. Half an hour passed by, when I heard some whisperings outside. I opened the door and looked into the darkness. Three men were whispering amongst themselves. One was Nawaba. I did not recognize the other two. The second carried a sharp-edged spear and the third had an axe. I gathered courage and asked, 'What are you whispering about?'

Nawaba jumped up.

'I am afraid you have to leave this place too. The raiders are going to be here in the morning. And then they will kill these people for having kept you. So, you understand? Leave at once.'

His words made me dizzy. I hadn't even had water to drink since morning. There seemed to be no end to my misery. Even so, I did not want that these people should have to suffer for my sake. I decided to leave.

But I did not know the way around this place and could he not be gracious enough to get me out of here?

'I am afraid I can't do that. My children are all alone in the house. But I can get you a guide if you like. He will take twenty rupees.'

'Are bhai, I haven't got twenty paisa on me.'

But Nawaba had no alternative suggestion to make. 'That you have nothing with you is not his concern. He won't go unless you pay him. It is up to you to find the money.'

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Find the money! But we really had none. Nawaba callously announced, 'Then I can't help you. You just get out of this place.'

In a flash came the thought of my ornaments. 'Look at this.' I held one of my earrings out to him. 'Will this do?' He was quite pleased at the prospect, and sent for one of the men outside.

'Please give it to him.'

I refused. 'No, not now. As soon as we get to our destination, he shall have it.' Had they wanted, they could easily have taken away everything from us and turned us out into the night, but it probably did not occur to them that we might have had any other jewellery with us.

I woke up the children. They got up with a start, 'Get ready, my darlings, we must go from this place. You have nothing to be afraid of.'

Our new guide led the way. We had to grope about in the dark. The track was hilly and full of thorns and stones. When we had gone a little further, I heard a sound behind me. I turned round and saw a Sikh boy following us with a lighted torch in his hand. One of the men in our company accosted him.

The boy named a well-known Sikh gentleman and said, 'He passed through this way with his family; his ten-year-old son slipped off the path and was injured. His condition is very serious; he is almost dying. Please be careful with your children.' He was in a hurry, and when he had gone we were again left in the darkness.

Shortly we all became separated from each other, and I felt desperate. Shiva Dayal came up to me and said, 'I went a little ahead of the others and met some Hindus. A well-known *rais* of Muzaffarabad is also with them. He

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told me that if we wanted to be safe we should send away our Muslim guide and join them.' Shiva Dayal thought it right and so did I. I asked the guide to go back and look after his children. I did not forget to give him the earring that I had promised. He was most pleased to have it, and there was a sad look in his eyes when he bade us goodbye.

So we joined another group of people who were walking ahead of us. On the way, a man walked up to me; he seemed to feel rather sorry for my youngest child and offered to carry him for me. The poor child had been tired out by our meanderings.

Eventually we arrived at a place called Botha, and there we put up in a gurudwara. Many people had arrived there before us. But we could not recognize them in the dark.

Gradually, as the hours of the night passed, people began to leave the place one by one, but nobody bothered to ask us to go with them. I tried to look for the people who had brought us to this place, but they were all too taken up with their own problems to be of any help.

I turned to Shiva Dayal. 'Don't you also let us down now, Shiva Dayal, before we get to a safer place. Will you?' I was becoming very desperate by then.

But his reply was most touching. 'Mataji, as long as I live I shall not desert you and the children. Please have that much faith in me.'

This cheered me up. 'Well, let us not stay on here, as they are bound to come and burn the gurudwara in the morning. We must go somewhere else now,' I suggested.

We had nowhere to go, and we did not know the road. But it would be taking an imprudent risk to stop there any longer. So in desperation we took the road that opened out before us, for a destination that we did not know.

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The first streaks of dawn appeared. The road ahead of us rose in a steep incline, probably leading to a hill. Further on, we saw a group of men standing with lathis in their hands. They came forward and asked us, 'Where are you all off to?'

'To our chowkidar's village.'

They barred the way, and their spokesman firmly announced, 'You are not to go another step forward. There is a government order prohibiting anyone from passing through here.' We waited, hoping to persuade them to let us go through. They were peasants from Muzaffarabad, and so blood-thirsty were their looks that I felt it was surely divine grace that restrained them from beating us to death. So we walked back down the hill. It seemed that we were going back on the little we had achieved. Every step now seemed an ordeal. We were all completely exhausted and the children were blue all over with cold.

Walking down the slope, we met an old man, a Muslim. I asked him, 'Dada, I shall be indebted to you if you put us up in your place for an hour or so. I should like the children to warm themselves before the fire.' This poor old peasant was most obliging and he took us to his house. This was some ten miles away from Muzaffarabad. In front of the house there was a veranda and in the room inside, a few cows and buffaloes were tethered to a side. In another corner there was a *chula,* and a sword was hanging from a peg. The old man had a wife, two sons and three daughters. He showed us in, and very politely asked us to sit down. Then he introduced us to his wife, 'These are our guests and we are duty bound to protect and respect them. Look at the plight they are in.' He prayed for divine mercy on us.

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The children ran near the lighted chula and huddled together around the fire. We eagerly warmed our hands.

Presently it was discovered that the peasant's son was a class-fellow of my elder son. The young peasant boy ran to his father and proudly announced that it was the son of the wazir, his class-fellow, who was there. Both of them embraced each other. It was exhilarating to watch the unsophisticated joy of two innocent children together. The lady of the house got busy and left to get us some food. She made some tea and cooked a roti of maize flour. Roasted maize was also offered. I did not have much of an appetite, and only ate some roasted maize. With a place to stay in, food to eat and with the children quite pleased, I was indescribably happy.

The lady asked me if I would eat the food she cooked, or would I prefer to cook it myself. I said, 'Of course, I with take what you cook, but just now I don't feel like eating anything. My children, of course, would be glad to get some food.' They brought out whatever they had, and cooked the meal. They were very poor and there was not enough to go round. The children were only too pleased to have what little they could get. They gave us a cot and I shared it with my children. We were so tired that our bodies lay there inert with no semblance of life in them.

But peace was not to be. Again, there were voices outside. Someone said that the raiders had arrived somewhere nearby. I woke up Shiva Dayal and told him, 'If the raiders come, before anything happens to them, slay the girls one after the other with that sword hanging from the wall.' The girls did not seem to be horrified at the prospect of being slain. The thought of the raiders must have worried them more.

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But it was ordained otherwise. The neighbours there insisted that our host should turn us out. He was, they declared, inviting trouble for all of them. The old man refused to be intimidated. His faith was outraged. 'I refuse to turn out anybody who has come to me seeking shelter. This is not what our religion has taught us.' The neighbours were neither moved nor convinced. They were all adamant.

A little later, our host had to leave the house and go out somewhere. The neighbours did not lose this opportunity. One of his relatives held hurried consultations with the other people in the house, and then walked into our room. He had a gun in his hand. Instinctively we all stood up and lined up against the cot. With the gun pointed at us he solemnly ordered, 'Get out, I say, or else I fire.'

This man had been in the army, and had served in the frontier provinces. I decided to face the trouble and be shot down. I told him, 'All right, go ahead and fire. I am afraid there is nowhere I can go.' We did not indeed have the strength left to leave the place. He threatened us a good deal but to all his threats I replied that he could shoot us if he wished to. He could not, however, make up his mind to shoot.

Then he said, 'All right. You stay with your children but these two men must go. They have to go.' The two men also were afraid to stay. So I told them, 'I think you had better leave us. Don't get into trouble because of us.' Silently they stood up to leave; tears rolled down their cheeks when they said goodbye to the children. Om took the guptee that I had brought with me.

That day we stayed in that house. The children had not had enough to eat for the last forty-eight hours. They sighed deeply and looked at me with a pathetic look in

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their eyes. I tried to comfort them and said, 'My children, haven't I often told you stories from our ancient lore about the adventures of our ancient heroes? You know that they held honour dearer than life. We too must remember this ancient ideal and be ready to follow their example. So cheer up and face whatever comes with a smile.'

The menfolk of the village had gone out to bring home their share of the pillage. Only the women stayed on indoors. Throughout the day, one heard nothing but news about 'them'. 'They' were in one village and then in another the next moment. We heard, 'they' were burning, 'they' were plundering. The women trembled with fear and one heard curses all around. Darkness gathered and night set in, but nobody went to sleep. Our host returned, bringing some flour with him. Of this, he gave a portion to each of his friends.

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# THE DEDICATION OF A BROTHER

It was midnight when the mistress of the house, accompanied by one of her relatives, came to our room. She said, 'I am afraid you will have to leave this house immediately. We can't keep you here any longer.'

This came as a shock to me. I tried to protest very mildly. 'You have sent away our companions so that we may stay. Where do you think I can go at this odd hour with these little children? Please let us stay the night. We shall leave in the morning.'

But they would not listen to me. Our hostess's relative suggested, 'We shall guide you to the hilltop where we keep our animals in the summer. Up there is a cave. You may stay there with your children. We shall send you food whenever we can.' I did not know if it was safe to accept the offer. For a little while I had been feeling acute pangs of self-pity, and I could not forget that I had done nothing to deserve the plight I was in.

But life is full of surprises. In the midst of this midnight episode, a young man walked into the house, and when he had spoken with me for a few moments, tears came to his eyes. 'I look upon you as my sister,' he said. 'And I know that I shall spare myself no trouble to see you are well taken care of.' I was deeply touched by this outburst

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of kindness from a stranger. On a sudden impulse, I tore off a strip of cloth from my dupatta and tied it round his wrist; this piece of cloth was the nearest thing to a rakhi that I could improvise. When a woman ties a rakhi round the wrist of any man, he is by convention bound to afford her the protection and devotion that is the privilege of a sister. To complete the ritual, I put a little tilak on his forehead with blood from my little finger which I pricked. He acquiesced in all this and I felt strangely elated and cared for.

I explained to him, 'This is an ancient custom that dates back to the time of Humayun. Thus I adopt you as my brother. I expect you to live up to this sacred relationship.' He requested our hosts to let me stay there till the morning. The next day, he promised, he would take us away to his own house. Heartened by our imminent departure, our hostess left us alone to sleep in peace.

I was very spiritless when I got up the next morning. Intense depression had come over me and I longed to weep. I repeatedly found myself thinking about my husband. I could not shake off the feeling that his life was in danger. But those tears of mine, I knew, were not going to do my children any good; they needed all the cheering up that they could get. So I pulled myself together, and went and sat among them.

Our hosts had gone out somewhere in the morning. Their twelve-year-old son did not believe in wasting time; forthwith he turned us out of the house. 'Go away, I shall not allow you to stay here any more, not a minute longer.'

Outside it was dreadful. We heard such heart-rending tales of woe. The Hindu women in the village, they said, had lit a fire and, dressed in clean clothes and chanting

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sacred mantras, they had jumped into the fire. They took to death with a smile on their lips. When the raiders arrived and were confronted with this desolation, they dragged the burning bodies out of the fire and tore the ornaments off the charred corpses. All this was happening when we were being turned out of the house.

With dazed senses we walked on aimlessly, and took the first road that lay ahead of us. We climbed a hill and saw a cave hidden behind the rocks. I asked the children to hide inside and sat down near the entrance to keep watch. I chose this cave to rest in so that passers-by may not know about my daughters. Over two and a half hours passed. We could hear the shooting very near us, but luckily no bullet came our way. Soon after, the man, whose dedicated protection I had so gratefuly accepted the day before, came looking for us. The children were quite happy to see him again; they had an instinctive feeling of safety in his presence. 'Look, here is your brother,' they announced.

My 'brother' wanted us to go with him straightaway to his house. When we arrived there, he looked considerably relieved. He said, 'I had gone to Domel this morning to ask the raiders if I could shelter some women in my house. They have agreed. Now I am glad that I shall be able to help you openly. But there is no knowing when the raiders will turn up and ask about you all. In that case what should I tell them? Though we resemble each other in no way at all, would you mind if I told them that you were my sister from Sialkot? After all, these girls must somehow be saved.' I readily agreed and felt grateful indeed. Here was a Muslim who was living up to the ethics of his faith.

He had seven people in his family—two little girls, his step-mother, his father, a married sister and a younger

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brother. The house had a veranda in front and only two rooms. His livestock was kept in one of them. We had to share the room with the animals and were given a bed. Dried cow dung was all over the floor and a mat was spread on it for some of us to lie down. The smell of the dung made me sick and added to it was our parching thirst. We had been forbidden even to breathe heavily lest we be found hiding there, but the children could not help going out every now and then to get themselves some water to drink in spite of the risk of being seen by someone from the village.

The raiders, we guessed, had been inciting the local Muslims, who had by that time become obsessed with a fear of an imminent Sikh invasion. They had collected a whole armoury of sticks, spears, axes and pistols. This fear-ridden and savage crowd parading through the streets looked like so many demons. There was desolation all around but the worst was yet to come.

The day went by and darkness fell. We were allowed to come out of the room on to the veranda. Our host's sister was weeping profusely as their father had not returned yet and it was getting late. I tried to comfort her. 'It is no use crying, my dear. Let us get on with our cooking.' They were so poor that they had nothing to eat. The crops were ripe but still lay unreaped in the fields. At last, some flour, rice and pumpkins were somehow procured for the dinner to be prepared. Their children looked very weak and undernourished. I felt sorry to see them eating only roasted maize for a meal.

The men in the village were busy looting and plundering but my host stayed in. He was a clean, honest man and could not bring himself to join the looters and share the

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spoils. I could not help admiring the uprightness in this unsophisticated character. I felt that I was doing wrong by living on his meagre resources and not being able to help him in any way. I asked Swadesh and Veena to help grind the flour and the boys to lend a hand with the extraction of gram from the maize. I offered to husk the paddy and, for the first time in my life, I learnt from my hostess that one did this by crushing the paddy under one's feet. I had never before done this kind of work. My feet were already sore and weary with all the endless walking, and had now begun to bleed. I felt a momentary reproach against the life of ease I had led in the past. And I was afraid for the children. I was quite unfit for any physical work, but a living had be earned to feed my children.

The lady of the house, who came in just then, must have noticed the tears in my eyes and my bleeding feet. She was very sympathetic. 'Please let this be,' she said. 'I can't bear to look at your feet. So long as we are here, there is no need for you to work.' My daughters also came in and, with broad smiles beaming on their faces, they proudly announced that their work was done. I looked at their hands; they were swollen and bruised all over.

The meal was ready; the children ate something, but the meal left them quite as hungry as before. I had some fried pumpkin. The children of the house also did not get enough to eat; nevertheless, they were cheerful. I could not help marvelling at the unselfish understanding and tolerance these poor peasant folk were capable of.

We eventually settled down to get ourselves some sleep. The room was dirty and stinking. My mind was full of uneasy thoughts about the future. I kept awake till the small hours of the morning. When I did doze off, I slept restlessly. The children kept on asking me about their

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father. I did not know what to tell them. I woke up early in the morning with a start to find the cow chewing my dishevelled hair; the poor animal had almost pulled it off my head.

It was the same story all over again. The children were all very hungry and there was nothing to eat. They swallowed handfuls of corn in sheer desperation. My youngest boy was in a horrible state. His hands were bruised and badly swollen. He began grinding the corn, starting where he left off the day before. He was trying, I think, to get over the pain and discomfort with more work. I asked him to stop but he would not listen. He resented my interference and said, 'Didn't you tell me that it was a sin to eat without working for it?' Yes, it was I who had told him that, but now I had to do all I could to persuade the child to stop working. Meanwhile, a friend of the family had dropped in to see our hostess. Obviously she had heard about me. Readily, she offered me gratuitous advice. 'I am sure if you send these children out, people will take pity on them and give them something to eat. As for you, I think you could hit it off with somebody who may keep you in his house.' I knew what she was hinting at and my gorge rose at the very idea. This artless lady did not of course know I was willing to kill myself and the girls, if the worst happened. Just then my host and his father came in. They had a dejected look about them. I was concerned and wanted to know what had happened.

It was the father who replied. 'Some neighbours have seen you here and have informed the tribesmen that we are keeping some Hindu women with us. I am afraid there is only one way out. The girls could recite the *Kalma* when

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the raiders arrive and they could swear that they were Muslims.'

The children had learnt the Kalma at school. I told our host that I was quite willing to learn the Kalma, but when the moment arrived, I was sceptical of my ability to keep up the lie. I was afraid I might not be able to lie about my religion.

'Today, they have been abducting Hindu women wherever they are hiding,' was all the old man could say.

The food remained untouched; we had lost our appetites through fear. Everyone in the house was very worried, for the raiders insisted on entering every Muslim home; they would pretend to be looking for Hindu women in hiding but would eventually loot the homes . Very often, they even kidnapped Muslim women. The suspense continued till 4 p.m. when two sturdy Muslims armed with guns arrived. One of them was the headman of the village and the other was, to my amazement, our milkman. I recognized him, but did not give myself away. He came in and shouted at our host, demanding that we be turned out of his house. The raiders, he said, wanted us.

They led us out of the house. Bullied and harried by these creatures who would stop at nothing, we walked on. I told my sons, 'You mustn't worry too much about me. As for you, if they are going to shoot you, die bravely. But never run away and get shot in the back'. And to Veena I said, 'If it is too hard to face death, just remember how Indian women of old went to their death without flinching.'

We finally reached a place where several Hindu and Sikh people had been collected. Two armed tribesmen were keeping guard. We were asked to join the group.

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Soon, several raiders came there; they looked most forbiddingly ferocious.

One of them delivered a short speech to the local Muslims. 'Keep these women here for the night. Kill a calf and force them all to eat the meat.' Making us eat beef would be an act most symbolic of a forced conversion to Muslim faith. I trembled at the idea and prayed for divine mercy.

Somehow, our host, my adopted brother, managed to get in. He came up to me and said he still stood by his vow of protection. I took off all the jewellery I had on me and handed them over to him. He said, 'These will remain with me as a sacred trust. You can have them back when you will.' The milkman whom I had earlier recognized also came up to me and asked to be forgiven. He said he was absolutely helpless in the hands of the raiders and had to do as he was told.

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# RETURN OF CONSCIENCE

The two young tribesmen returned. They decided that we were all to be taken to Domel that day, and the idea of beef-eating to symbolize our conversion was dropped. Every man and woman was thoroughly searched. All their money and jewellery were taken away. Women had currency notes sewn into the hem of their shirts and salwars; several had hidden their jewellery in the folds of their garments. The search was thoroughly humiliating. Women who had currency notes hidden in their shirts were made to take them off. Even their modesty was not respected.

My turn came. One of the tribesmen came up to me and took hold of me by the hand. I struggled to free myself, and the word Ram, the name of our Lord, instinctively came to my lips. This, of course, annoyed him and he let me go with a jerk. 'Learn to give up this false religion, will you?' I got away with it in the first round.

Then they searched my children. When they found nothing, they sent them over to me. My adopted brother had come to see how we were faring, and he asked the tribesmen that as the ordeal was over, if he could take us to his house. They agreed to let me go, but insisted that my daughters stay behind. But I wouldn't agree to this. So there was nothing for my 'brother' to do but leave. And when he took his leave there were tears in his eyes.

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The search went on. They did not even leave us enough to cover ourselves with. It so happened that I had not brought any of my clothes; otherwise I would have come in for my share of the humiliation also. The raiders had collected a formidable booty of warm coats, pullovers and shawls.

The search over, we were asked to follow the raiders. They made Swadesh and Veena walk immediately behind them. Before we were separated, I again whispered to my daughters what I had told them so often before, 'Don't let them touch you, my daughters. Jump down the hill or throw yourself into the river if need be.'

Veena had by now imbibed some nobility of desperation. She said, 'Don't you worry, mother. You better look after my little brothers. We will see to it that we do not disgrace you.'

I felt proud that a girl of fourteen had spoken so bravely, and that she was my daughter. One of the tribesmen caught us talking and shouted at the two girls to follow more closely at his heels. The little children could not keep pace with me; they had been starving since morning. Though I knew I would not be able to help if anything happened to my daughters, I was anxious not to lose sight of them; so I practically dragged the other children along the road. The children were worn out and I was taking a risk. I was hustling them along the narrow path on the edge of a river bank; there was always the danger of our falling over and drowning. But if we did not walk fast enough, we would be left behind in the midst of this dreadful wood. There was something herd-like about this group trampling along the narrow path; we all piously prayed for safety, but there was no humanity left in this scramble for safety

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where one thought only of oneself. Mother forgot her child, and husband had no thoughts for his wife.

As dusk gathered, they had begun to bully us as we were not walking fast enough. Some of the women with us were pregnent. They were mortally afraid and were in labour, and could not walk at all. I thought I would speak to one of the raiders and appeal to his better sense. 'You are driving these innocent children like cattle. I am sure you agree with me that this is not what Islam has taught you. Only two days ago, my husband was the wazir of this place. I don't know where he is now and here we are being driven from place to place. We respect the human personality more than our lives. If you are a true follower of the Islamic faith, you cannot but have sympathy with this sentiment. Please do us one favour, will you? Hand us all over to your chief.'

Both the raiders understood Hindustani and they did not know how to answer my question. They could not help agreeing with me and said, 'Islam does not teach us to torture people. In that you are right. But we are helpless. We are here to carry out orders.' Even then, my harangue had softened them a little, and they now let us march more slowly.

It was some time before one of them spoke to me again; he was, obviously, still thinking of what I had said. 'We have travelled a long way to come and fight here. We too have mothers, fathers and sisters.' Bashfully he confided that both his two sisters were unmarried.

I thought I could now drive home my point. 'Well, in that case, you should understand, shouldn't you, the sentiments that inspire family life, its joys and sorrows? And all that we expect of you is that we should be treated

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well.' My appeal to their sense of righteousness had its effect. Their vanity would not let them overlook the obvious considerations of decency. Yet they had their orders. They looked at each other doubtfully.

Suresh was walking ahead of us with the two raiders. I followed him at a distance, because the boy was tired and lagging behind. After a few moments, the tribesmen returned with Suresh. They were now repentant and conscious-stricken. It was obvious from what one of them said that he was very sincere. 'We have to obey orders. It is no use hiding that we have been asked to take you to a place where people are being tortured. But I promise you this much, we shall do all that we can to help you and your children.' This avowal of good faith came to me as a surprise. I wondered if it was Suresh who was responsible for this change of heart. Or, perhaps, I myself had touched some tender spot, when I spoke about their faith. Anyway, I was immediately relieved at this outburst of goodness.

We reached Domel at about ten. The veterinary hospital there, on the banks of the Krishna Ganga and overlooking the river, had escaped arson. The hospital had spacious rooms, and we were put up in one of them. Several Hindu women and children were already staying there; they had arrived three days earlier. The room was dark and overcrowded; one felt choked, and longed for fresh air.

When our party entered the room, a veritable pandemonium ensued. It was an odd assortment of bad characters who greeted us. There were a few deserters from the Dogra regiment and a few Pakistanis who had enlisted as crusaders. They burst into the room like a whiff of foul air. They shone torches on women's faces, and rubbed

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their hands in vulgar glee while wild shouting deafened our ears. They let loose a real hell on earth. They got ready to carry away several of the women with them. The women refused, and we could hear them weeping bitterly. The raiders were unmoved. This was no baptism of fire for these crusaders. They had burnt and raped, and were quite hardened by now. But the two raiders who brought us there remained true to their word. They stood before us and cordoned us off from the other raiders. We trembled at the atrocities that went on around us, but nobody was allowed to come near us. Just then an officer, obviously a superior, walked into the room and shouted at them to leave the women alone for the time being. The raiders were too intent on doing their will to obey him.

When all the women had been carried away, we were left alone with the two young raiders. They pulled out their guns and sat at the door to keep guard. From an adjoining room, we could hear groans and vexed cries. People were crying for water and food. They had been shut up there for three days without even any water to drink. Some had collapsed, and their condition was serious. It was agonizing listening to their helpless whimpering. I could not contain myself any longer. I decided to speak to the two raiders whose conversion to humanity had astonished me only a little while ago. I requested them to fetch some water for the captives in the other rooms. For the second time, the miraculous happened. They readily agreed and returned with pitchers full of water. We rushed to the other room; it was too dark and there was no knowing who wanted water most badly. But everyone drank and the pitchers soon became empty.

Some of them had collapsed and died before we could reach them. It was a horrid sight that turned one's insides.

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Mothers had killed their children lest they should be humiliated. All around there was only weeping and lamenting. People were being hard put to save their own lives. Some acquiesced in their lot and others stood up and fought, but several lives had already been lost.

It had been an impossible ordeal for these women—an ordeal of terror and endless waiting. Resigned to an ignominious end, they had waited and waited for the blow to come. This waiting was a soul-killing experience, and when the blow did fall, it hurt all the more because their nerves were jagged waiting for it. They rose and killed themselves because they could not thus wait for their death, with bellies that were empty. They would all much rather die than have their modesty outraged. There were not enough guards and warders to keep watch, and they ran away and jumped into the Krishna Ganga. Before they jumped themselves, they threw their yelling children into the river. The river glibly gulped them all—their bodies and their misery.

The tribal chiefs heard that this was going on. They hated the idea that these women should get away with it so lightly. They would perhaps have felt fulfilled if the women had died of slow torture. More men were sent for. A strict guard was established. The men were separated from the women and taken away; everyone believed that they were being led away to be butchered. There were touching scenes of farewell. The children cried bitterly, refusing to be left behind.

When all had gone, the two friendly young raiders returned. One of them spread a blanket on the floor and made Swadesh and Veena lie on it. Then he took another blanket and covered them with it. Several guards who

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had arrived that day, passed by and invariably they stopped to ask who was sleeping under the blanket. 'Soldiers taking a nap' was the reply that those two young tribesmen gave. They kept watch without a respite. They did not even take any time off for a meal; they were afraid we might be discovered.

Meanwhile, the tribesmen, who had earlier carried away several women from our party, returned. Among them were also Muslim deserters from Jammu and Mirputi. The scramble started all over again. Every woman was surrounded by a host of raiders, tormented and bullied. The rebels proved to be much worse than the tribesmen; they were more callous and more brutal. They snatched away children sleeping cosily in their mothers' laps and flung them to the ground and dragged the women out of the room.

Some of the raiders rushed to the part of the room where I was sitting. My two Pathan friends, who were still keeping guard, knocked a couple of them on the skull with the butt-end of their guns. They collapsed and made an ugly heap on the floor. The others dared not come nearer. The two Pathans frightened them away. 'Don't you dare to come here. If you do, we will crack your skulls!' they threatened.

How long, I wondered, were they going to keep these bullies off? I could not help thinking that if they did break through, I also would have to throw myself into the river with my children. And yet the thought of death was distasteful and depressing.

It was midnight when all was quiet again. One of the two Pathans came to me and suggested, 'We shall leave behind two of our friends who can look after you. I do

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not think it safe for the girls to be with you any longer, and I suggest that you trust us and let us take them away from here. We have so far managed to save them very narrowly indeed, but if somehow they are detected in the morning, it will be terrible. We shall bring them back as soon as it is safe. You should have no cause for worry.' I readily agreed to this proposal, and they took Swadesh and Veena with them. The two new warders, who had arrived to replace the old pair, were really simple-minded Pathans, and they gave my children a basketful of apples, chestnuts and apricots. The children's faces beamed at the sight of fruit. They had gone hungry for days on end.

I asked our new warders, 'Could you tell me what happened to the district officers in this place?' I guessed they would be helpful and added, 'My husband was among them. He was the wazir of this district.'

One of them answered, 'I couldn't say which of them was your husband, but we had orders to kill all the officers.' My heart sank. I could not face the thought that my husband was among those who had met their death at the hands of these raiders.

Thinking of the raiders, my mind wandered and I thought of these four Pathans. How different they were from the rest, and how good they had been to me. I thought the others also, must innately be quite as good and I exclaimed, 'You are angels whom God has sent to help me.' This seemed to inspire the same mood in them and they started reciting the Kalma. They wanted me to recite it also. It was only fair, I thought, that I should appease this little vanity of my companions. As they recited the Kalma, I repeated it line by line.

Just then another group of raiders came along. Again the agonizing cries rose from the other room. Two of

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them tried to break into our room, but my two companions frightened them away. I had by then become quite convinced of the goodness of these two men also.

As time passed, one of the Pathans suggested to me, 'Would you like to go with us to our country? We can find a place for you to live in, inside a mosque perhaps. In fact, you could settle down there if you liked to.' I was being politely invited thus to change my faith. I was profusely thankful to them for being concerned, but I explained that I couldn't very well go away from my country and leave my husband and children behind. Besides, I was not old enough, I reminded them, to join a monastery of any kind whatever.

We were still talking when I heard cries from the next room. I heard the screams of women, who cried they would rather die than be disgraced. Nevertheless, they were dragged away to appease the hideous and brutal lust of men they had never set eyes upon.

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# MASS SELF-IMMOLATION

The day dawned on our despair. My daughters and their escorts must have reached a safer place by now. The other women were surprised by my attitude; they thought it was foolhardy, my sending the children away with two unknown raiders who were most likely to turn treacherous. But these two men had had plenty of time to change their minds. If they had wanted to do anything the previous night there was nothing to prevent them. After all, they had staked their own lives to keep their promise and I felt I could certainly trust them. Moreover, I had to choose between two risks: in any case, sooner or later the girls were bound to suffer indignities had they remained in this place. I was quite sure that there was less risk in my handing over the two girls to these two men. And then did not my girls know what to do if anything really happened?

A little later we were asked to go out for a while; the raiders led us out of the room, along the river bank to the Domel bridge. What I saw there I shall never forget. Before that I had only heard about the women who had jumped into the river; for the first time I saw the tragic spectacle of humanity surrendering life so willingly and for no great cause at that. Some women still stood on the edge of the bank with forlorn looks on their faces and a few others were knee-deep in the water. They threw their

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children first into the rushing river and seemed impervious to the shrieks and yells of their own infants. Life refuses annihilation. As the children floated down the stream their heads came up once or twice and revealed faces writhing with excruciating pain before the river casually gobbled them up. The mothers looked on vacantly in front of them. Prolonged suffering had wiped out all colour and emotion from their faces. Then they jumped in themselves and it was all over in the twinkling of an eye. Meanwhile, the children upon the bank saw what was coming; with that unfailing instinct which man shares with animals they knew the smell and colour of death when it was imminent. They ran to their mothers' sides and clasped them around the knees with a strength that comes only with despair. The raiders toiled hard not to let these women die. They cajoled and they threatened; they even drew their guns and shot at some of them who were beyond reach. But the desire for self-immolation was too great and they all went to their death with a seeming lack of pain, pity or feeling.

I cannot say for certain how many women and children that day gave up their lives in the river. Apart from me only three other women, who were with me in the same room, did not kill themselves.

I saw my twelve-year-old, Vimal, rushing towards the river. I knew what he was up to, so I caught hold of him by the arm and stopped him.

'Mother,' he said, 'let me go. Will you? I want to die. I can't bear to think of what is going to happen to my sisters.'

He struggled to free himself but I held him back. 'You are a coward,' he said. 'You want to die a shameful death and you won't lift your little finger to avert it. You needn't fear death, Mother, only have something worthwhile to

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die for.' He would listen to no argument or reasoning. The solution of suicide, once discovered, seemed to all to be the most efficacious. My son had also imbibed the escapist spirit of this futile solution. 'No self-respecting woman is alive now. Oh Mother! Why don't you also jump into the river with my sisters? At least leave me to my destiny. I shall kill myself!'

I tried to persuade him. 'Don't be so obstinate, my son. Don't you think I could jump into the river if I wanted to? But do you forget your father? When Papa hears about it, he will be utterly miserable. I must know first what has befallen him. Then only can I decide what to do.'

One of the raiders was passing by us. He stopped to taunt me. 'Why don't you also jump in? I shan't stop you—you can be sure.'

'Well, I don't intend to, unfortunately,' I firmly declared. But many of the raiders had broken down and were weeping. The scene they had just seen had moved them so. I was astonished to discover that I was right when I told myself earlier that perhaps not all of them were unlike my four Pathan saviours. Perhaps innately they were all good. Encouraged by this outburst of tenderness, I dared to tell them, 'And now why are you weeping? It is too late for regret or remorse. You have blood on your hands. This scene will haunt your memory for all time to come. You won't ever have a clean thought which is not sullied by this ugly memory.'

The other women thought I was a little too outspoken; they tried to restrain me and muttered, 'It is time you stopped now. You are talking out of turn. You will only bring fresh trouble upon all of us.'

I do not know how many among the raiders understood my Hindustani, but one of them was visibly moved and

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confessed, 'It is true what you say. Please tell me if there is anything I can do for you.'

He appeared to be a man of some authority. He might be really useful and I wondered if he could help me find my daughters. However, before I could suggest anything, he said, 'Here is a man who will take you back to the jail safely.' I thanked him and walked with my children in the direction of the city. The jail was at the foot of a small hill. On the way we saw so many houses that had been burnt down, and their charred remains formed ugly lines against the blue sky. Even then there were one or two other soldiers who were gadding about. They stopped people on the way and made them shout, 'Pakistan Zindabad!' in chorus.

Our guide was hardly twenty-two and on the way I tried to talk to him. 'Why have you left your home and come all this way?' I asked.

'Because the rulers of Pakistan told us that Islam was in danger and the Muslims in Kashmir were being tyrannized and their women threatened with dishonour,' was the ready answer.

I told him this was nothing but false propaganda and everything had gone on smoothly in the state until the raiders had invaded it. But the lies which he had been fed so long had made a deep impression on his mind. He stuck to his point and was not convinced. 'Tribesmen cannot tolerate threats and they have come to Kashmir to protect Muslim women,' he persisted. I did not know how I could convince this misdirected young fellow that if there were any people in Kashmir who needed protection, they were certainly not the Muslim women.

'Do you get paid for all this?' I enquired out of sheer curiosity. 'Oh, no,' he said, 'nothing has been decided so

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far. We have only been told to kill the Hindus, carry away the girl of our choice, plunder anything that we can lay hands on, and burn the houses down. Of course, what we really want is the land.'

'What you have done here does no credit to you or to your race. You have disobeyed every tenet of your religion.'

He evaded an answer. 'You see, it is true that many tribesmen have come here for loot and plunder. We had heard that there was plenty of gold in Kashmir. We have killed nearly all of them. Only a few who went into hiding on the very first day are still perhaps alive. The women who live are either old or wounded. Of course, there are a few young women in the jail.' I thought that was quite an accurate, though heartless, appraisal of the situation. There was no use talking to him.

On the way we met groups of local Muslims. Some of them, if not all, were sorry for us. Some thought it served us right. We also met some tribesmen, barefooted and their clothes in tatters. They had their guns slung across the chest over the shoulders and their cartridge cases belted round the waist. They were simply wandering about, and when they laughed, they produced a lot of mirthless noise. Some of them were quarrelling over their share of the looted property. One of the men watched us approaching them and pointing his finger at Vimal and my daughter Kamlesh he cried out, 'What fine children they are! Let us take them away with us.'

Our escort spoke to him in a language I did not understand. But the man obviously changed his mind and declared, 'In that case, we shall get hold of them when they have got to the jail.' They all eyed the children with a possessive look as we moved on.

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We eventually reached a spot from where we could see the wall of our bungalow. Even though it had been burnt down it still looked so familiar that I almost began to feel that the house was the only reality and what had happened for the last few days a part of a bad dream. In a fleeting moment of happiness I exclaimed, 'That is our house.'

'Is that so? But our men are staying there now,' my guard informed me. I wanted to stay and look at the remains of my home but we were hustled on.

The jail was quite crowded with men, women and children. Many of them had been hit by bullets on their hands and legs and were in great pain. The children had had nothing to eat or drink for four days. One man was weeping for his child, another for his wife. A daughter had been taken away from one and a wife from the other. Many younger women had disfigured their faces with dung, clay and mud to escape the lustful eyes of the raiders. Then I saw Shiva Dayal and Om Prakash. They were most pleasantly surprised. So was I.

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# THE LONELY MARTYR

We settled down on a broken cot. Now that the moment I had so long been looking forward to had arrived, I was impatient and breathless. I asked Shiva Dayal and Om Prakash for news about Mehtaji. The ex-*daroga* of the jail was also with them. There was something very ominous about the way Om got ready to tell a long story. He said, 'Mataji, I have neither the strength nor the ability to go over the incident in my mind again. It happened on the very first day. I knew what had happened but couldn't break the news to you. Mehta Saheb . . .'

I did not want him to finish. I knew by instinct. I knew he was going to say something I had put off believing for the last few days. Mehtaji had become a martyr. The ground, it seemed, had slipped from under my feet and there was a moment of pure stifling grief. The view faded from my eyes and I was left alone with my thoughts in a world where the self and the non-self were curiously inseparable. I was ashamed and pained that I had denied myself participation in a cause for which he had died. It was a cause that justified him and his death. It was a selfish thought that I was not with him in the great event; if I had died too, my death would have acquired a significance in retrospect. The pain returned, and with it the hard realization that he would never again be there to share

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my joys or my sorrows, for the rest of my life I would have to miss him, and miss him all the time. I winced as an excruciating pain gripped my limbs and it was as though I was on the brink of an empty death which had no meaning and which I did not want.

But somehow I pulled myself together to ask him to tell me the details of what had happened. I wonder now how I managed to.

He replied, 'I was there at the time when it happened but I deliberately refrained from telling you, for I knew that you wouldn't be able to bear the news. I thought that you might go and do something rash; the children then would have been orphaned. Had I given you the news then, the shock would perhaps have rendered you incapable of doing even the most obvious things. There was then no time to be wasted and the children had to be looked after.'

I could not hold out any more. I broke down and sobbed, 'Why did you keep it from me, Om? He has given his life for his country. And what have I done? I had taken a vow not to desert him. If you had told me earlier, I would have gone to the bungalow with the children and we could have remained together to the end! I would much rather it had happened that way.'

Om thought that I might not survive the shock and he was very anxious for me.

The daroga took up and continued the story: 'Everybody is talking reverentially of the martyrdom of wazir saheb. They say that he laid down his life with great courage in the cause of duty. Om should be able to confirm this.' He thought that the reverence with which my husband was remembered might soften my grief, and so he narrated the story in detail. 'The wazir saheb left

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his bungalow for the high school. The superintendent of police, the sub-inspector and twenty-three sepoys were with him. A few days earlier a cannon had been mounted on the school compound and nine Dogra soldiers had been posted there to ward off the raiders. But the soldiers had deserted. Everyone warned Mehtaji that it was not safe for him to venture into the school compound but he wouldn't listen. He went in and was in a fury to find the place undefended. He got ready to defend the place himself with the help of the sepoys. A few local Muslims tried to stay his hand. "We all respect you a great deal and we don't want you to throw away your life like this. You can't fight single-handed against all of them and Pakistanis have come here in their thousands." They only succeeded in annoying him. "Look here," he said, "your country is in danger. You should be doing something about it. Instead, here you are asking me to go and hide myself. Come and lend a hand now. Let us help the sepoys here to entrench the school." Hardly anyone came forward to help him. One by one they all sneaked away quietly. The sepoys, and one or two other people who offered to help, were too few to be of any use. So Mehtaji gave up in disgust. He told them, "I tried my best to organize some sort of a defence. None of you have any social responsibility. You refuse to think of anything but your own lives. If you won't help me to do my duty here I shall go home. I also owe a duty to my wife and children when they are in trouble." People again warned him not to go; the raiders had entered his house and taken possession of it. Mehtaji ignored them as before and rushed back to the bungalow. The sub-inspector of police, a Rajput, also went with him but he stayed back at the

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door. Mehtaji went into the house. Om should take over now because he knows the rest of the story.'

Om was crying and he spoke in a choked and faltering voice. 'I was hiding in the bathroom when Mehta saheb walked into the house; I was watching him through the window-pane. He saw me and asked, "Where is Mataji?" I made frantic gestures and pointed in the direction of the path that led to the shrine. The sub-inspector, who was waiting outside, understood what I meant and he made no effort to come in. Mehtaji was disappointed and annoyed. He asked me, "Why did she run away like this? She should have stayed and faced the situation. I came back with the hope that we would all be together to die a brave death." I didn't, however, attempt to speak for you. I merely implored him to go away. "There are sixty of these raiders inside your house," I warned him. But he had decided to face whatever was coming to him and refused to budge.'

Om could not carry on any more and burst into tears again.

I tried to console him, 'Don't weep, Om! He knew that there was no other way out but to face it and die bravely. I was a coward to have run away from there. Now please go on, leave nothing unsaid.'

Om pulled himself together and continued, 'The tribesmen discovered that Mehtaji had come back to the house. They all drew their guns at him and shouted, "You, kafir, go on your knees and prostrate before us, we represent Pakistan. And take that hat off your head." Mehtaji didn't speak. He stood motionless. "Tell us if you are a Hindu or a Mussalman," they demanded. Mehtaji still didn't reply. One of the local Muslims came up to

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my master and entreated him to avow that he was a Mussalman. "How can you forget your little children and give up your life? After all, you have nothing to lose by saying so." The tribesmen were getting impatient. "Once again we ask," they said. "Are you a Hindu or a Mussalman?" The wazir saheb replied this time and told them emphatically, "I am a Hindu, and not a Mussalman." That was enough to provoke the raiders to the extreme. They all fired at him one after the other. He stood erect and took four bullets before he fell. He kept chanting Ramnam feebly till life left his body. I was there to the end and ran to you after it was over. It was very brave of the wazir saheb but it was also tragic in the extreme. I haven't yet recovered from the shock.' Om again broke down.

I asked Shiva Dayal, 'What happened to the body?'

He replied, 'My friend Ram Charan discovered the body of wazir saheb lying on the path leading to your house. Just then a neighbouring Muslim happened to pass by. Both of them carried the body to your bedroom and removed the chappals from his feet. When the bungalow was set on fire, the body was still there and it was cremated. When the tribesmen left the house after having killed Mehtaji, one of the local Muslims heard them talking to their compatriots. "This man, whom we killed today, was a very brave man. We shan't forget this incident for a long time to come. Actually, we had orders to arrest him alive, but he was so defiant that we got angry and shot him dead."'

I interrupted to ask, 'Did they know for certain that he was the wazir?'

'Of course they knew that he was the wazir and the house was his. They merely wished to make him say it himself.'

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Tears were flowing down my cheeks and I told them, 'I am proud that he could do his duty. He was an upright man, and remained so till he died. He couldn't possibly have acted in any other manner.' I then turned to my children and said to them, 'You have now heard, my children, how bravely Papa faced his death and that is a lesson for you. Imbibe, if you can, some of his devotion to duty. You are fortunate children. Your father was a brave soul.' Silently we vowed to ourselves that we would do nothing that went against the martyrdom of this great man or troubled his departed soul. I do not suppose that the children understood all that I said. I was beside myself with grief and admiration. What I said, I said like someone possessed.

Gradually, the frenzy of my grief subsided. I was profoundly touched by the greatness of his sacrifice and the thought even consoled me a little. And now I began to think of my daughters and presently became very concerned for them.

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# A FRUITFUL INTERVIEW

On the third day we were given some meat and bread. Some were glad to have anything to eat but at all others refused the food given by the raiders. Instead, they went to the neighbouring farms and helped themselves to the sugarcane. The crop was just ripe enough for harvesting. Prolonged suffering had made them partially apathetic, and they were too hungry to have any moral scruples. They cut stalks of sugarcane and even as they chewed them they wept like helpless children. We were told that we would regularly receive our rations from then on.

I was lost in my thoughts when there was a stir among the other women and I saw them glancing furtively with fear in their eyes. I asked them what the confusion was about and learnt that it had become customary for the raiders to wander into the cells, carefully scrutinize the women and make their choice. They would then come later in the night and take them away. If the children were in their way they would snatch them from their mothers and hurl them to the ground. This had gone on for three days. Many of the women could not live through this ignominy and had killed themselves with poison. Some broke window panes and tried to commit suicide by eating the powdered glass. But death did not liberate them so easily and it was utterly demoralizing to watch women in the

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grip of a mortal and agonizing pain. The fathers and the husbands could not bear the sight of this slow pathetic death. They got out of the jail when the warders were not looking and threw their loved ones into the river to drown their pain. Even then, in some cases, the raiders managed to drag the women out of the river in time and foil their escape.

The raiders had agreed that some of the men amongst us should go forth and fetch the rations for us. Shiva Dayal had collected a few stalks of sugarcane and some maize. The children ate them eagerly. They had had practically no food for the last two days. I had not had very much either over the course of four days, but I was not hungry. Food no longer seemed necessary to keep oneself alive when grief both justified and occupied so much of one's existence. I had tried very hard to face my husband's death bravely, but separation from him seemed to gnaw at my vitals without respite. I had lost the only justification for being. Above all a sense of guilt greatly troubled my mind. My husband had probably thought me a coward and a deserter.

I could think myself to have been forgiven if he had appeared even in my dreams to assure me that I had done the right thing in leaving the house for the sake of the children. Only if I could be convinced that in his last moments my husband had not thought me a coward could I hold my head with dignity and pride, and could perhaps derive significance out of his sacrifice. Cowardice or tears would be no wreaths to his memory. I felt that my duty was to cheer up the children so that they would not give in to a feeling of shame and defeat.

Hardly a few hours had passed inside the jail when a young man came to me and said, 'My name is Chaman Lal. The wazir saheb and I were good friends. It was God's

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will that he should fulfil His greater purpose. I have come to you with a message from the Pakistan chief who is now staying in your bungalow. The entire administration of Muzaffarabad is now in their hands. He has sent word to say that he would very much like to see you. Actually, his brother has come with me and is waiting outside. He will escort you there.'

A shiver ran down my spine. I feared that the worst was going to happen. I was a fool to have thought that I was going to be spared. I was now presented with the same alternative as the other women who had died. It was a choice between liberation through death and acquiescing in a humiliation which the raiders demanded of me as the condition of my existence. Death seemed to me, as it did to the others, to be the easier solution.

I untied a piece of red string from my hair. It had been given to me by my in-laws when I was married. It was both a relic and a symbol of a past to which I still looked back for strength. Without letting anyone see what I was doing, I knotted it around my neck and tightened the noose with all the strength I could muster. I must have been unconscious for some time. I came back to my senses to find Om and Chaman Lal bending over me with concern on their faces. They had sprinkled water on my face to revive me and they had loosened the knot and had removed the string.

The idea came to me in a flash. Why not pull myself together and face the situation? I felt an urge to prove myself worthy of my husband. After all, I should still have latent reserves of strength on which I felt compelled to draw. The self-righteous instinct was not always to be despised. It was inevitable that people who seek fulfilment

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in the pursuit of a simple faith should at times appear unbearably self-righteous. I remembered an incident that had happened when my husband was still alive. I once claimed half boastfully and quite seriously before my husband, that if a woman was strong in her faith and her discipline, she would have a thousand men worshipping at her altar in sheer admiration. My husband had laughed off my claim. Here then was a chance to make it good and perhaps if I came out of it unscathed, I would not feel so guilty towards my husband. I decided to go and see the Pakistani chief.

'Where is the man who came with you?' I asked Chaman Lal. 'Show him in.' My face had gone livid. I was feeling very weak after my recent attempt at committing suicide. I was mentally preparing myself for the fateful journey ahead when Chaman Lal walked in with two men. They saluted me in grand style and said, 'Our chief has sent us to fetch you.' I agreed to go with them only if they would let me take my children and my servants with me.

And so we set out on our way back to our ruined house where till the other day we had known no sorrow. The path we had once walked with light carefree steps, we now tramped along barefooted and in rags. I could not help being mildly amused by the vicissitudes of our fortunes.

Not much was left of the bungalow. All that the eye could see was a vast and dismal expanse of charred remains. Only the kitchen and some of the guest rooms had been spared by the raiders' fire. The place was quite busy with armed raiders moving about.

I was taken to the chief who was busy talking to a group of raiders. He was a tribesman and appeared to be about fifty years old. He was dressed in a salwar and a

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shirt with a gun slung across his shoulder and a box of cartridges on the belt around his waist. It did not take me long to notice these details. I greeted him politely and said, 'Please accept the salutations of a poor woman.'

He looked hard at me before he said, 'You don't have to say these polite things to me. I am very sorry about the death of wazir saheb. He was a lion-hearted man.' I was surprised to find myself interrupting him to say, 'Khan saheb, why should you regret his death? He was no coward nor did he give up his religion in fear or fail in his duty. Had he done so, it might be appropriate to regret his death. I consider myself fortunate for having been the wife of such a man; he was indeed a great man. I want our sons to live up to the tradition set by him. I shall be only too happy if I knew that my sons would throw away their lives without a second thought when occasion demands it. If, in the name of Islam, you have decided to kill us, go ahead and ask your men to open fire. See how bravely my children can face death.' The children too rose to the occasion and stepped forward. They shut their eyes and asked the Khan to order his men to shoot.

Everyone around was visibly moved by the scene. The guard in front of me replaced his gun in the holster and walked up to the children and put his arm around them. The Khan's eyes were moist when he said, 'Behenji, your children will go very far. You are a mother whom every one will envy. Such fearless innocent children you have! In all these four days I haven't seen anyone who faced us without fear.' He wished to assure me of his good intentions and added, 'You are our wazirani now even as you were when your husband was alive. We all have great respect for you. Please make yourself comfortable

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and in the meanwhile I shall have your daughters brought back to you. I know where they are. There is a family of local Muslims who live nearby. One of my men had gone there on a routine visit. There, he found two young girls who informed him that they were both daughters of the wazir saheb. They had been brought there by two of the tribesmen who had asked the Muslim family to take care of the girls. My man asked the girls if they trusted the tribesmen. "Oh, yes! Certainly we do," that is what your daughters replied. They said, "We have been very well looked after in this house. The tribesmen actually took us earlier to two other Muslim homes. But they discovered that raiders frequented those houses and so eventually they brought us here." In fact from them I learnt that you were in the jail and it was because of the fairly accurate description they gave of you that my man was able to identify you there. Also your daughters refused to go with my man unless they were sure he had instructions from you. Would you give my man some kind of token so that your daughters are convinced that you are here? My men will bring them presently to you.' I did so and a man set out to fetch my daughters.

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# AT THE RUINED HOUSE

We came back to our home—rather, to the ruins that were once our home. I walked with obvious effort. I went into my bedroom where my husband had been shot down. His body had been consumed by the fire that had burnt down the bungalow. All that remained of him now were the ashes strewn over the floor. His death, the ashes reminded me, was a reality. I had unconsciously resisted accepting it all this time, but it was forced on me when I entered the room. The image of his tall handsome form, his animated face in multitudes of situations flashed through my mind. Then something snapped within me and there was complete darkness.

I felt lonely, fondling my grief and strangely comforted by it. The restraints that make one's behaviour normally acceptable had suddenly relented. I was intensely aware of my momentary existence in a different world with other norms of feeling and expression. Others did not belong nor could they enter there. Those around me perhaps thought me strange and were looking curiously at me when I spoke. I told the tribesmen not to come in my way as I was going to perform the last rites for my husband.

'Are you sure that these are your husband's ashes? We had a sweeper clean the place of his remains,' mocked a mischievous voice.

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But I knew. A familiar fragrance suggesting his presence still lingered in the room. I tore off a piece from my dupatta and gathered the ashes from the floor. As I came out with the ashes in my hand, I saw my daughters enter with the Khan. I should have been pleased to have them back but grief had turned me crazy. I shouted at them, 'Cowards! You value your lives more than your honour. And yet I had told you what to do.'

They did not expect this strange welcome. 'Mother,' they pleaded, 'we would have done as you asked, had it been necessary. Don't you see, it wasn't necessary?'

The man who had been sent to fetch them also assured me, 'Your daughters do not deserve this, madam. They have a lot of courage. The first time I went to fetch them under the Khan's orders, they refused to come with me unless you yourself asked them to.'

The girls asked me, 'Where is Papa?' I showed them the ashes. I knew that this was most cruel of me but I was beside myself with grief and did not even bother to think how they would take the news. They wept bitterly and their tears calmed me. I told them that their father had died bravely and sacrificed his life for truth. They should also be brave and should not cry in front those who had killed him. He would not have liked that. They muffled their sobs but little Swadesh was too heartbroken to be comforted.

With the ashes still in my hands I sat down in the compound. I kept the bundle of ashes in my lap and prayed with folded hands for strength and courage to bear my loss and to do my duty till the end of my life. The children and the tribesmen stood by and listened silently. When I finished, the Khan ordered his men to vacate three rooms for us. They brought some utensils from the kitchen so that we could cook the rations they had given us.

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I wanted company. I wanted the presence and silent understanding of an intimate friend who could enter into my subjective being. I remembered Mrs Santram Modi whom I had known as masiji since my childhood. She was a very kind and gentle woman and I requested the Khan to have her brought to me from the jail. The Khan was only too obliging and soon after masiji was carried into the house on a cot. Kamla, the daughter of one of the clerks in Modiji's office, was with her. But masiji's clothes were stained with blood and she was gasping for breath. I ran to her cot to receive her. She had been hit by a bullet in her stomach and blood was still oozing from the wound. She was also suffering from a bad cough. I asked her about her husband, her son and Kamla. When she spoke it was with painful effort and her faint voice strangely reminded me of an annihilating eternity. Kamla's father had been killed, she said; he was a Kashmiri Pandit. About the others she had no definite information. Masiji agreed to stay with us and our number now became twelve—seven children and five grown-ups. The children were all very hungry and I asked Om to get on with the cooking. When the meal was ready the children had their fill for the first time in four days. Mrs Modi and I did not eat. We could not.

The Khan had decided to shift to the doctor's bungalow. The soldiers and tribesmen stayed behind to cook their dinner in the kitchen. Before going away the Khan came up to my doorstep and called out, 'Behanji, if there is anything I can do for you, please let me know. I have asked two of my men to guard your rooms. It is not very safe here at night.' I thanked him for all his kindness.

The serrated shadows of our charred walls lengthened. We were better off now and safer but the gloom returned

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with the darkness. The children were exhausted. They went off to sleep soon after they had their dinner. Only the other day they had slept there comfortably with little thought of the morrow. Today they had to return as the guests of the tribal chief who had killed their father. I sat close to them with the ashes still in my lap and prayed for strength to face the future. My vigil through the silent hours of the night ended at daybreak and I asked my sons to go to Domel to immerse their father's ashes in the Krishna Ganga.

It is customary in a Hindu family for the eldest son to perform the last rites of the deceased parent. When a son comes of age, he is given a sacred thread which he has to wear across his chest and over his left shoulder, and the occasion, which is called *upanayana*, is ceremonial. It symbolises his admission to Brahmcharya and a privilege of duties; his foremost duty is to the mother, and then to the guru and the father.

I asked Shiva Dayal to go with the boys, but immediately it struck me that it was not safe for Hindus to venture out alone. I sent Vimal to the Khan to ask for an escort. The Khan was kind enough to send not only one of his men but also his car. My two sons drove to Domel with Om and the guard and they were back after an hour.

The two raider chiefs were going back to the front; they had come to take leave of me. It was the Khan who spoke to me, 'You have nothing to fear, sister. We shall be back before it is dark. Won't you pray for our success?' I said, 'I would like you, sir, to have the discretion to choose between right and wrong. This is no way to conquer a country by plundering it and molesting its women. You may have another God but what is intrinsically good is

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independent of any religion.' These men had decided to be good to me and I knew I was making it difficult for them. But the Khan had strength enough to concede a point without being embarrassed. He was perfectly composed and said with quiet assurance, 'I admit that all this has happened in the past. I shall see to it that it does not happen again.'

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# CLOUDS OF WAR

For four days I had not bathed or changed. I was feeling very unclean and badly needed a wash. But I did not know how to get myself a set of clean clothes. Then I remembered that some of my clothes were still with the dhobi. I sent Shiva Dayal and one of the soldiers to fetch them but the dhobi refused to return them. He said that the raiders had looted his house. But the soldier insisted and eventually the dhobi produced one of my saris and a blouse. But there was no soap in the house. The raiders had taken away everything. I knew that a paste made from flour could clean almost as well as soap and I took out some from our rations. Washing my hair was a great strain and I was much too weak to be able to stand on my legs. It was five days since I had had a proper meal.

It occurred to me that it would not be proper for us to remain guests of the Khan indefinitely. I called the children to me and I told them, 'I think it isn't right for us to take food from the Khan without working for it. We don't want to live on his charity. So I shall ask the Khan to give us all something to do. We have lost everything but it will be utter shame if we also lose our dignity and make others pay for us.'

The food was ready in the meanwhile and Jodha, masiji's cook, insisted that I eat something. For some time

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now, I had been in a self-denying mood. I felt as if I could work off my grief by not eating. Occasionally, this attitude seemed pompously self-righteous, but somehow this self-denial gave me a sense of cleanliness and purity. Yet I could not afford to starve myself for if I allowed myself to grow weaker it would be impossible for me to do anything for the children. As a compromise I decided to have only one meal a day.

In the afternoon a number of local Muslims came. They had come to express their sympathy. But I made it very obvious to them that I resented it. They stayed on to tell me how brave it was of the wazir saheb to have done his duty till the very end. One of them said, 'That fateful day, we saw him move about the city without any fear. He was most anxious to send news to the proper authorities and would not heed our warnings. He had decided what he was going to do and he was very amused when we asked him to go into hiding. People are still talking about him and they feel that they have yet to praise him enough.'

Others, who came later to see me also praised his martyrdom and I was happy that there was not a single sigh of empty grief.

The tribesmen had not vacated our bungalow. They continued to use the kitchen and went past our window in groups every now and then. Some even stopped to peep at us through the window panes and shouted at us, 'We will avenge our women in West Punjab.'

I argued with them. 'You are angry now but why don't you calm yourselves and think for a moment? Two wrongs don't make a right. What do you think you are going to get out of making people here suffer for what happened

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miles away?' But they had no patience with me, and so another day drew out its long empty hours.

With the fall of darkness, the night readily conjured up fantastic figures and shapes. Sometimes they were frightening but invariably they were ugly. But the darkness held no fears for me for I had already realised vaguely that the future was going to be more depressing. I was not afraid; I was merely in a spiritless mood. It was as though I was groping in the darkness of night through a familiar path without purpose or destination. The hours of the night grew relentlessly and I idly contemplated the nocturnal shapes and forms. Mrs Modi, who was sleeping on the bed next to mine, was coughing incessantly. I felt her forehead with the back of my hand. She was running a high temperature.

The two chiefs came to me in the morning. One of them said, 'Behanji, we suggest that you go and live in Abbottabad. We will give you a bungalow and make arrangements for your children's education. When your son grows up we will make him a wazir also.' I thanked them but explained that I was in no mood to go anywhere. I wanted to stay on where my husband had left me. The chiefs seemed to be in a generous mood and I took this chance to express my concern about the other women in the jail. They told me that the women had already been released from jail, but they had asked to be permitted to stay on in the town.

I felt that this was not enough. They had to be rehabilitated. They were in no condition to help themselves. So many homes had been broken up. I asked the Khan to let me go and look after these destitutes myself. There was probably an element of escape in this solution but I

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then thought I might be able to do something to help hundreds of these unfortunate people. The Khan would not hear of it; he rather advised me to rest. The chiefs stopped at the kitchen on their way back and ordered the cooks not to allow any beef to be cooked in the premises as long as we were in the house.

Mrs Modi's condition had become very serious and her wound needed immediate attention. I sent one of the soldiers to fetch a doctor. But he could only find two Kashmiri compounders who dressed Mrs Modi's and Kamla's wounds.

My former host, whom I had earlier adopted as my brother, had come to know that I had returned to my bungalow. He now came with his father to see me. They were very pleased to see us out of trouble. My ex-host said, 'You are indeed lucky. You remember, on the day when you were with us, the raiders searched my house and took away all my wife's clothes and jewellery. Your jewellery, they didn't touch. I have looked after them carefully and shall bring them to you tomorrow.'

'Please don't bring them back; keep them for yourself.'

'No, I can't take them from you. Some day your children will need them.' Before he left he promised to return with the jewellery the next day.

Suresh had become quite friendly with the Khan's men and often went out with them.

One day he came in and asked me, 'Mother, what is our caste?'

'Don't you know, my son? We are Vaish mahajans.'

'Yes, that is what I told them. They were talking among themselves and one of them remarked that the mahajans must be a brave race because my father had faced their bullets without flinching. He felt that I was a brave fellow

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too. Do you remember telling us once that the Rajputs were the bravest race. How can that be?'

'The Rajputs are of course very brave but there are others also who have done things which take a lot of courage,' I replied.

I noticed that Suresh was staring into my eyes intensely as I was speaking. I asked him, 'Why, Suresh, what is the matter?'

'Mother, let me look into your eyes. The Khan's brother said that you were no ordinary woman. He said that there was a fire in your eyes and he could not look into them. But I don't find any.'

I knew that Suresh was worried as I explained, 'There is nothing in my eyes, Suresh. It is just that they are afraid to look me in my face because it reminds them of the wrong they are doing. My eyes are the same as any other.'

Before I could finish, three men rushed into the room and they all spoke together, 'Mataji, they have reached Baramula. The people are resisting. Very likely they will be in Srinagar in a day or two.' I did not like to believe it. So I merely affirmed that it must be just a rumour.

One of them laughed at this and said, 'What makes you so sure? You will see whether it is true, within a couple of days!'

The next time the two raider chiefs came to see me, there were two other officers with them. One of them was formerly the police captain of my home district and the other was Rahamdad Khan, who was well known as the extra commissioner of Hazara district. They both greeted me and Rahamdad Khan said, 'I was sorry to learn about wazir saheb's death.'

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I had the same answer as before, 'One does not lament the death of a hero. I am not in need of sympathy, but I would like to know why you torture our men and women.' It was to the captain I spoke and he answered with enthusiasm, 'It will be an all-out war now with aeroplanes and guns. We shall show the world how brave men fight.'

Rahamdad Khan was more friendly. 'I have heard about your fearless children,' he said. 'May God bless them. You have been very courageous and patient. We shall do everything to make you happy here. The wazir will look after you.'

Heartened by his friendliness, I requested him to look into the affairs of the city and put an end to the suffering that the tribesmen continued to inflict on the people. He promised to set everything right.

As they were leaving the police captain enquired, 'What became of the captain of this place?' He was referring to the captain of Muzaffarabad.

'His family wasn't here,' I replied unhelpfully.

'Yes, I came here three days before the attack started and I met everyone who was here at that time.' He smiled as he said this, gloating over his success. This man had been a spy. The police captain he was referring to had been with Mehtaji when he went out of the bungalow, but later he hid himself in a neighbouring house. The Pakistanis had been looking for him; they discovered him in Domel and shot him dead when he came out to get a drink of water. Several of the officers of the old administration had been killed but the raiders had instructions that they should be lenient to the Kashmiri Pandits.

The days went by and we were still in the bungalow. The atmosphere was full of suspicion. Nobody could be

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trusted. I constantly thought of my husband and remarked to the children, 'It would be nice if we could have a photograph of your father.' An hour later Suresh came running to me with a copy of his father's photograph and the negative. 'Where did you find this?' I asked.

'Mother, I was out wandering around the place when something among the bushes caught my eye. I became curious, picked it up and found these.' It was most surprising.

The tribesmen continued to treat us with respect through fear of Rahamdad Khan who was indeed very considerate. To replenish our insufficient rations he had sent us some flour, ghee, pulses and tea. The other officers also called on us. Among them were the new wazir, an ex-revenue officer and a tehsildar. The revenue officer and the tehsildar were both Kashmiri Muslims. We exchanged a few formalities before they suddenly decided to confide in me. 'Do you know we are living in hell? We prefer death to this kind of life.'

Being an officer in the new administration was no fun. I tried to cheer them up. 'Now, don't be so depressed. Do what you believe to be your duty and you will be all right. I am not better off either. Here I am with my daughters amidst these people and at their mercy. Let things take their course.'

'But they have great respect for you and Rahamdad Khan will see to it that you people do not come to any harm.'

Rahamdad Khan had indeed been very kind. He had readily sent a doctor and a compounder to examine Mrs Modi and dress her wounds.

My children were not doing badly considering the circumstances. Only my baby son insisted on having something to eat as soon as he woke up every morning. I used to give him bread kept overnight from the dinner. One

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day it had become harder than usual and with tears streaming down his cheeks he said, 'Mother, I can't eat this bread. It sticks to my throat. I can't swallow it.'

'I know that, my boy, but aren't you going to be brave? If you can't eat this bread how will you fight for your country? You know there are thousands of little girls and boys who don't even get this dry bread.' He wiped his tears and quietly swallowed the piece of bread in his hand. Four days later he came to me and smilingly said, 'Mother, do you know, this bread tastes like a biscuit?'

A few days later Vimal fell ill. I felt miserable. I had no money to buy him any medicine or milk. I was very happy when I saw Rahamdad Khan, who chanced to pass by our house. Voluntarily he offered me ten rupees to spend on Vimal. But I felt it was humiliating to accept money from others.

He guessed what was in my mind and he said, 'Behanji, I quite understand your difficulty in accepting this but shouldn't we adapt ourselves to changed circumstances? Would you hesitate to take help from your own people? Can't you look upon me as one of them?'

He handed the money to Vimal and told me that he was going to Baramula. He promised to make better arrangements for us on his return.

Bitter fighting was going on in Baramula at that time. The tribesmen had closed down the kitchen in our bungalow and the two chiefs were not to be seen anywhere. The tribesmen had also stopped coming to the house. We did not know what was the matter. The other soldiers who were left behind started plundering the homes of the Hindus who had been allowed to resettle in the city after their release from jail. The local Muslims seemed to have at last seen through Pakistan's ruse and were beginning to

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be afraid. Strangely enough, it was to the Hindus they now looked for support. They even offered to help the Hindus if they were in trouble.

The *incentive* for these generous offers was, however, their recently acquired knowledge of the ominous approach of the Indian army.

One day Chaman Lal came to see me and suggested that I move to his house. 'It is not safe for you all to live alone in this house,' he said. 'I hear the raiders are retreating and they are sure to seek to plunder as they withdraw.'

I was fortunate to have so many friends to help me. I told him that I would certainly think over the matter and let him know in two or three days.

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# ANOTHER GENTLE SOUL

It was over a fortnight since we had returned to our bungalow. All around, there was an air of an immobile timelessness. People moved about with a stare in their eyes—their vision averted from the future and fixed irretrievably on the present, as the past offered them no solace.

At last Indian fighter jets appeared in the horizon. Against a copper blue sky, they looked like so many black birds with spots of sickly yellow. So, it was true that Indian troops had arrived on the scene. We heard their bombs exploding in Domel. An occasional bright flash of red and blue was followed by a deafening roar which sounded like a deep-throated cough, and columns of black smoke trailed skyward. We were almost convinced that the noise would bring the roof down. With reverential fear, the tribesmen spoke of the planes as 'sons of God'. They were terribly scared of them.

The local Muslims now openly sided with the Hindus when tribesmen broke into Hindu homes with the intent to carry away the women. Many Muslims publicly condemned the massacres in the city. Islam seemed to be in two minds about the danger to its faith. Native notions of right and wrong had blended with a keen practical sense and produced the right attitude in the local Muslims. They knew that they shared a common destiny with the Hindus.

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Mrs Modi felt very worried and thought me foolhardy for staying on in the bungalow with my daughters. I too realized that I was running a risk and agreed to shift to Chaman Lal's house. While we were busy preparing to leave, Om and Shiva Dayal went ahead of us with the luggage. A policeman stopped them on their way; he wanted to know where they were going.

'Mataji has decided to shift to another house. She doesn't think it safe to stay in the bungalow any more.'

'No. Go back and tell Mataji that we shall not let her go to any other house. We are responsible for her safety. I shall send a few guards to keep watch on the house at night.'

The servants returned but no guards turned up that night. The next morning we heard that Chaman Lal's house had been looted and several women kidnapped. Several Hindu homes in the locality had been ruined. It was just an accident that mine was not one of them. I had been extraordinarily lucky all through. I was always escaping danger just in the nick of time.

About four days later we received the news that the Indian army had taken Baramula. The tribesmen had lost morale and were beating a retreat. The officers of the Pakistan army, it was reported, were even beating up the tribesmen to force them to stay on and fight. Thousands of them had fled the scene of fighting and as they passed through the villages, they laid their hands on whatever they could find. Some of the raiders who had been killed while retreating were found to have their pockets stuffed with amputated human limbs. They did not have time perhaps to remove the rings and bangles, so they had cut off the arms and ankles of the women who

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had worn them. The people of Muzaffarabad were panic-stricken; they had never known anything like this before.

One day, around 4 p.m., we heard piercing shrieks; somebody was in trouble. Just then we heard a man outside the house calling out to me. I looked out and was surprised to see a moulvi who lived in a mosque nearby. I did not know him well. Mrs Modi suspected a trap, but I decided to take a chance. I went out of the house to hear what the moulvi had to say. He had thought that someone in our house had screamed for help and had come to see if he could help. He also felt it was not safe for me to stay on in the bungalow. He thought there was every likelihood of the raiders coming to our place also; we would all be much safer in his house. I thanked him and agreed to shift to his house. But Mrs Modi was still skeptical of his intentions. Since he was a moulvi, the chances were that the raiders would not search his house. It was just as well; for, the next day, we heard that the raiders had actually entered our bungalow.

The children explored the moulvi's house. In one of the rooms they came across some furniture which they immediately recognized as ours. They rushed to tell me about their discovery. 'Mother, look, these are our things.'

I hushed them and said, 'Oh! It doesn't matter. If they hadn't been brought here they would have been burnt in our house. It is much better that somebody should use it.' This was certainly no time to talk to the moulvi about it.

There was panic among the Muslims. They had come to know that a Sikh regiment of the Indian army was advancing and they had heard rumours that the local Muslims who had joined hands with the raiders came in for punishment. One night, all the local Muslims decided

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to flee the city. The moulvi was also very uneasy and his wife wept bitterly in fear for her two daughters. She had lived there for a long time and had almost become rooted in the soil. She was finding it difficult to leave behind the memory and the tradition of a lifetime. An enormous crowd of Muslims had collected in front of the house. The women were wailing and weeping and the men were talking in hurried whispers about their plans for the future.

I strongly felt that it was wrong of the Muslims to leave the city for fear of the Indian army. I tried to make some of them see reason. 'Please listen to me,' I pleaded. 'You shouldn't be taken in so easily by these stories circulated by Pakistan. None of you will be harmed.'

One of them protested. He said, 'Don't you know what happened in Jammu? The Indian soldiers are not going to be pleased at the sight of the city littered with Hindu corpses and its looted homes proclaiming their emptiness with open doors! In the end, we will have to pay for everything that has happened.'

'I don't believe a word of this story about what happened in Jammu. In any case, it isn't right that you should go away. And I promise you this—if anybody has to die, I will be the first. I shall take you all to Domel and march in front of you and I shall face the first bullet. It should be easier to talk to officers of the Indian army than to the raiders.'

This seemed to hearten them a little and it was easy for me to convince them because they really did not want to leave their homes. They all clustered around me, and one of them said, 'You know the ones who went over to the raiders' side. You should be able to vouch for our innocence. We certainly didn't want the raiders here. Before they came, the Hindus and Muslims in this city got on very well.'

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There were some among them who doubted if it was wise to stay on in the city and yet others were in two minds. They all decided to go to the house of Abdul Aziz and take his advice.

Aziz was a tailor and had been a member of the Kashmiri National Conference since its inception. He was always in the forefront of every local movement which agitated for political rights and better conditions of life. He had a niche in every simple heart. Only a few days before the raids started, he had been released from jail. He had given shelter to as many of the destitute Hindu women as he possibly could and there were over four hundred of them staying in his house from which he had moved all his personal belongings.

Aziz also felt that the Muslims should not leave the city. He advised them to stand firmly together and help the Hindus. He declared that he had implicit confidence in me and that I would make good my promise. He sent a message saying that he would only be too pleased to put me up in his house.

The raiders were not happy about Aziz and they bullied him a good deal and even looted his house. In spite of this he carried on his good work and was arrested. Later we heard that he had been shot dead.

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# ANOTHER WAZIR FADES AWAY

Hitherto, the moulvi had been feeling secure under the banner of his religious leadership. He had felt that though the raiders respected neither women nor property, they, however, professed the same religion of which he was an acknowledged spokesman and therefore would certainly not harm him. But now he could somehow no longer believe that the raiders would leave him alone; and fear considerably upset his customary poise and robbed him of his usual serene and benevolent expression. He nailed wooden planks across the doors to his house and kept a loaded gun within easy reach.

The other Muslims were terror-stricken and recited the Qur'an with a zeal that was both innate and reinforced by fear; by doing so, they felt safer. The raiders were Muslims after all and would not trouble people reciting from the Holy Book, they thought. But here they proved to be mistaken. Once raiders broke open into the house of a Kashmiri who was loudly reciting verses from the Qur'an.

'We are all Muslims,' he argued as he trembled. 'Don't you see I am reading the Holy Book? Brothers, you should leave me alone.'

The raiders made no bones about their intentions and replied, 'What you read doesn't concern us. Money is the God we respect!'

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So they looted his house of everything there was in it, tore up the Qur'an and littered the floor with its loose leaves.

News of this incident got round. The Pakistanis were very anxious to keep up the fiction that these raids were merely a crusade against infidels and they arranged mass recitations from the Qur'an every day in the local mosque.

Pandit Tara Chand, the new wazir, often came to see us. He never confided his troubles to us, but I could see from his tired eyes and haggard face that all was not well with him. Probably, I thought, he was not getting on very well with the raiders.

A few days later, we heard that he had fallen from favour and subsequently was deprived of his post. He had nowhere to go and took shelter in the house of a Muslim tailor, but apparently he had lost the will to live, and very shortly he died there. The Muslims were reported to have buried him. His children—he had two daughters and a son—were later rescued by the Red Cross along with other refugees.

We had been in the moulvi's house ten days and our rations were almost finished. The moulvi, however, did not want to disclose the fact that we were in his house and could therefore do nothing about getting any ration for us.

The children did not have enough to eat and they shivered in the cold. Their tattered clothes did not keep them warm. It so happened that one day they saw some boys and girls playing outside. It was Sheila who first discovered that some of them were wearing clothes that once belonged to us. My children rushed in. Breathlessly, all of them spoke at once:

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'He has got on my coat.'

'Mother, go and get us our clothes back. Here we are shivering away and they are swanking about in our clothes!'

I tried to pacify them and explained that it would not be proper for me to go and quarrel with these children. I told them, 'It wouldn't be nice for them to know that you recognized your clothes. Go and play with them as if nothing has happened.' My boys and girls were used to living well and seeing others in nice clothes which once belonged to them was too much for these young children to accept.

It had become quite dark and, as usual, we were sitting with the doors closed. The moulvi had gone to the mosque. Somebody was tapping on the door and we hesitated a while before we opened it. A Pakistani official had come and there were three soldiers with him. The officer enquired, 'Is the wazirani saheba here?'

I did not know why he had come to see me and could not decide what I should tell him. In the end I felt it would be safer to meet him and stepped forward. 'My husband was the wazir. What do you want of me?' I asked him.

The officer saluted me respectfully and said, 'Behanji, I have been looking for you from house to house since morning. Rahamdad Khan has sent these rations for you. He would like you not to worry about anything. He will be here in a few days.' The soldiers handed over some flour, *gur* and salt and then went away.

The moulvi had obviously heard the thud of army boots approaching his house and ran out of the mosque. Surmising that something had gone wrong and the Pakistanis had come, he became very nervous. When I told him that the men were sent by Rahamdad Khan, he

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heaved a sigh of relief and exclaimed, 'And here I was under the impression that nobody knew you were in this house!'

The moulvi had by now become very favourably disposed towards me. He engaged me in long theological discussions and I listened to him patiently. But his wife was rather peeved that the Pakistanis should treat us with so much consideration. I tried to pacify her by giving her a share of the rations we received, but she continued to be hostile.

The moulvi was very observant and once I heard him telling his wife, 'Please don't be unkind to these people. They are our guests, and apart from that, all the officers know them. If they find out that we are ill-treating these people, we shall get into trouble.'

One evening I had news that Rahamdad Khan had come. I was anxious to meet him but walking in the streets was still not safe. I nevertheless went to the wazir's house, where he was staying. Rahamdad Khan was surprised to see me and said, 'Why did you take all this trouble? In any case I meant to come and see you tomorrow morning.' He promised to come to my place the next morning and talk things over with me. So I thanked him for the rations he had sent me and came away.

The next morning Rahamdad Khan came and brought a few others with him; he asked me if I would like to go away from Muzaffarabad. I did not conceal my reluctance to leave the place and he did not insist. I told him all that had happened in his absence and how the women were still being ill-treated.

I said, 'Of course, I am your prisoner and have no right to say anything. Moreover, I don't want you to feel I

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am moralizing. It isn't anything you don't know already. Human volition can't be independent of a moral destiny which we all believe in. In the name of their faith, your men have offended against all accepted canons of humanity. Ultimately, I think, their means can only be self-defeating. The objective results of their action can't possibly endure and besides they become less than themselves in the process.'

He did not answer me in detail but informed me that he had made arrangements to protect the women. However, when I asked him to permit me to look after them, he said, 'You won't be able to cope with the work.'

Besides the doctor, there was another man with him who did not join in the conversation that day. This man came to see me a few days later and introduced himself as the Khan and told me, 'I am a friend of the doctor, and we are all staying in your bungalow. I have discovered some crushed bones under a plank in one of the rooms. They tell me your husband's body was burnt in that room. Would you like them to be immersed in the river?' I readily accepted the suggestion and said, 'Yes, I should very much like to do that, but who will go to the river?'

'I shall go with your servant to the Krishna Ganga,' he offered.

In the meanwhile, the moulvi had come to find out who the stranger was. Addressing him, the Khan said, 'Moulvi saheb! Will you please take good care of this lady whom I look upon as a sister? Remember, if anything happens to her you will have to answer for it.' He then asked me if I read the Ramayana. When I told him that I used to read it at one time, the moulvi readily offered to lend his copy of an Urdu translation of the Gita. He wanted

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obviously to be on the right side of the Khan. Then the Khan asked me, 'Would you like to read the Holy Qur'an?'

I appreciated his good-humoured cleverness. 'Yes, if it is in Hindi,' I replied. 'I shall read it not through fear, but because I really believe that every religion, in its own manner, has a real message to give.' The moulvi went into the house and came back with the Urdu Gita, Hindi translations of *Sipara* and a few other books. Before leaving, the Khan reminded me not to forget to send Om to him the next day.

The moulvi's wife did not like my servants to stay with us. She was in purdah and wanted me to send them away to another house. I apologized for the inconvenience and explained that I felt as much responsible for my servants as I did for my own children and could not therefore ask them to leave. If she insisted, I told her, then I myself should have to go too. My affection for the servants, she thought, was maudlin. She was however a different woman whenever there was an air raid. She then became possessed of an elemental fear, and her customary squeamishness would then vanish. She trembled like a leaf and clung to me and insisted on my remaining close to her. On these occasions, there was something in her attitude which bordered on genuine affection.

The doctor's friend, the Khan, returned as he promised and he went to the river with Om to complete the immersion ceremony. Om was rather surprised to find him most scrupulous about the observance of Hindu customs. He insisted that Om should get to the middle of the river before he offered Mehtaji's remains to the river. After that, he came to see me every now and then and stayed on for hours discussing all manner of subjects. From his conversations I could not help feeling that he was

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rather fanatical about his national and religious affiliations. Quite often, his intense convictions left me cold and even bored me, but I could not afford to annoy him.

Mrs Modi was much better now but her wound was not quite healed yet. The old doctor did not come any more and a new man—he had come to the house once before with Rahamdad Khan—came in his place. He had been a doctor in the state army and was a Kashmiri Pandit before converting to Islam. He came every day to bandage Mrs Modi's wound. He never smiled but sighed very often. Probably he hoped to get a conversation started wherein he could explain and justify himself. Or perhaps he was totally unaware of the world outside; the memory of a past, difficult to accept, turned and rumbled inside him refusing to become part of his consciousness, forcing itself out in sighs. I never had occasion to talk to him much, and therefore could not really make out what troubled him.

The doctor stayed in our bungalow and there were ten others with him. They were all very friendly with the moulvi and often came to his house to see him. They all attended the namaz at the mosque. Every Friday, at the mosque, the Pakistanis addressed meetings to which the doctor and his friends came regularly. The doctor accompanied the Khan to the Uri front; they travelled in armoured vehicles painted dull olive-green and camouflaged with grass and leaves against any possible attack from the air.

One day, the doctor came to the moulvi's house with five of his companions and asked to see me. Among them was Professor Maqbool Quereishi who had come from Srinagar on a holiday. He was a class-fellow of my husband and had visited us earlier on several occasions. I was not

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feeling very well and did not want to ask them into the house. I sent word saying that I was not well enough to see them but they refused to leave. I was annoyed and came out of the house. 'Why can't you leave me in peace?' I shouted at them. 'I told you I wasn't well. And now, what is it you want to speak to me about?'

Generally, they wished to hear of my experiences and at the moment I was not prepared to oblige them with a narration. One of them looked hard at Suresh and vouchsafed me a suggestion, 'I am very sorry for this poor boy. He can't even be sent to school. If you would let me, I could look after his education.'

'Thank you. But I don't want you to pity my children!' I was very curt and short. They promised to come again when I was feeling better, and left. Later, we heard that these people went round from house to house to find out if there were women whom they could take away.

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# THE ASTROLOGER

We were living practically on nothing but flour and even though I ate only once a day I had an attack of dysentery. I sent Shiva Dayal to call in a doctor and he came back with one. This doctor was a fanatic Muslim and ever since he had come to Muzaffarabad, he had been inciting the local Muslims against the Hindus. He told tales of incredible suffering inflicted on Muslims in India. One day while I was talking to him in the courtyard, our voices were drowned by the roar of an approaching plane. Without waiting to hear the end of my sentence the doctor scrambled across and hid himself under a tree. He looked a sorry sight standing there and I shouted across to him, 'Won't you rather hide in the house! If anything happens to you, the people will miss your wisdom and your counsel.' He did not seem to relish my sarcasm. Later, while addressing one of the weekly meetings in the mosque he reportedly said, 'Mrs Mehta was so frightened that she asked me to hide myself. We tribesmen don't know any fear!'

Ashik Hussain and Miyan Nasir were both Kashmiri Muslims and had deserted the Kashmir state government during the raids. Ashik Hussain was now the wazir and Nasir the superintendent of police. They called on me to enquire if there was anything they could do for me. I told

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them that I would let them know when our rations ran out and we were in need of more. Rahamdad Khan who had been so kind to us had been transferred. The moulvi had also been appointed to an executive post.

Among those who called on me was a venerable old Pathan of seventy. He seemed a good soul and had lived many years in Allahabad. He thought that the tribal invasions were a slur on the fair name of Islam. He was in a reminiscent mood and told me about happier days in the past when he had gone with other Hindus and Muslims to Anand Bhawan, where they were all given sweets. 'We were all good friends. But look what is happening now. The worst in man seems to have been brought out—ugly desire, revenge—these will not do them any good.' He then went away promising to come again.

Sardar Ibrahim was the head of the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir regime and when he visited Muzaffarabad the people assembled in the mosque to hear his address. He had been told that I was in the moulvi's house and called on me. The Khan and Durrani also came with him. Durrani was a pleader from Jammu and I knew him well; his sister had been a friend of mine. When my husband was posted as governor of Poonch the sardar was practising there as a lawyer. I could hardly believe that he could have been responsible for so much bloodshed. He condoled with me for Mehtaji's death and asked to be forgiven for all the trouble I had been put to.

I could not restrain myself from answering, 'Sardar saheb, why do you ask my forgiveness? There are other considerations apart from social morality. Your men have killed and plundered, to them cruelty has become a habit of the mind. Those who do wrong on so large a scale hurt

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themselves more in the end. They become victims of mental conflicts which they shall never be able to understand sufficiently to be able to overcome them. Socially, they are certainly not assets for a peaceful society. You know your history, sardar saheb, and I am sure you know its lessons too.'

'We do not tyrannize people.' I was about to speak again when the Khan interrupted me, 'In any case we shall not give up Kashmir.' This remark led to a discussion between him and the sardar but I could not follow what they were arguing about. When their discussion ended, the sardar said, 'I want to send these women to India as soon as possible. That is, if they wish to go.'

'Have you any doubt as to what they would choose? If you permit me I shall forward all their applications to you.'

'No, it can't be done that way. When I am in Lahore I hope to make an announcement on the radio. After that, you will all be sent to India.'

He then spoke to the moulvi, 'You have done well in looking after these women and children.' He again asked if there was anything he could do for me. The Khan intervened, 'Look at the children. Their clothes are torn and are barely sufficient to keep them warm. They have had nothing to eat but flour. Even so she doesn't ask for anything.' Promising to set everything right, the sardar went away.

Four days later the sardar sent four sets of clothes. I was rather surprised to see that he had sent old clothes, but later I learnt that the men who brought them had exchanged the new clothes with old ones belonging to their friends. Along with the clothes, there was also some soap.

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Another visitor was a forest ranger who had known my husband. He advised me to go away from Kashmir. He told me, 'This is a very good opportunity for you and others who want to go away. Ten lorries which brought us grain are now returning empty. These can take you as far as Rawalpindi and from there it should be easy to get to Jammu.'

'I shall consider your offer,' I replied.

'Well, think it over and send me word at the hospital. I am staying there.'

We held a little conference and decided that we would not accept the offer. This was a good decision as we later learnt that he had planned to kill us all on the way.

We had been in the moulvi's house for two months. The moulvi and his wife were fed up with us but it was fear of the Khan and the other officers that restrained them. The moulvi made no secret of his dislike particularly for Chaman Lal. He often said, 'This man is very treacherous. He is a member of the Congress.' It was Chaman Lal who kept us informed of news of the Indian army.

One day the doctor brought somebody and introduced him to me as a jeweller from Bombay. 'He knows Pandit Nehru and can do quite a lot to help you,' he told me.

The jeweller looked at Suresh and said, 'Is this your son? I am a bachelor and would like to adopt him as my son.'

I said, 'These children are all I have. I am not going to part with any of them.'

The doctor did not like the turn the conversation had taken and chided him. The jeweller took the hint and changed the topic; he asked me my name and said, 'You see, I want to predict your future.'

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'What is there for you to predict! It is quite obvious to me.'

Putting on a very prophetic look he said, 'The days of your happiness seem to be over but it is still within your power to lead a happy life. You have one failing which is standing in your way: you don't trust people. If you will only listen to a friend, all will be well; otherwise you will be very miserable and become blind.'

I did not take any notice of what he said. He realized it was no use predicting my future. So he asked me, 'Could I speak to you alone? I want to tell you something.' I took him to a corner of the courtyard though Mrs Modi and the others did not approve of my being alone with him.

'My sister's son is in India and I want you to come with me so that I may arrange to get him here in exchange for your transfer to India.' He gave me a few more impossible suggestions and then began to misbehave. I had seen through this self-appointed prophet all along. The upshot of his prophecy was this: he was a friend and if I did not agree to go with him to India, I would fall on evil days. I tried to dismiss him summarily and told him, 'Leave your address with me. I promise to have your nephew sent back to you once I reach India.'

He insisted, 'Why don't you come with me? I shall take you to Panditji himself.'

'For the last time I tell you, I have absolutely no intention of going with you. I shall be able to meet Panditji myself when I go to India,' I finally told him.

He then gave me his address and asked me to write to him should I need his help. The jeweller was beginning to lose his temper. He was annoyed that his plans were foiled and I had seen through his game. His tone which had

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hitherto been mild and persuasive was distinctly one of annoyance and he said, 'You have hurt my feelings.' It was fortunate that he did not make a scene. There was nothing stopping him.

WITH LOVE TO
HINDU EDUCATION SOCIETY KASHMIR
FROM :
DR. N.L. ZUTSHI, Mumbai

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# AT CHAMAN LAL'S

Now, almost daily the troops came to our bungalow at the foot of the hill, and left for the front after dusk. One night around 10 p.m., the two daughters of the moulvi ashed Veena and the other girls to go with them to listen to some music. Sitting cooped up in that room made one feel almost ageless. It was as though time had become stale and lost its power to separate the events of the past from those ahead. My daughters were only too eager to stretch their legs a little and readily agreed. It did not occur to me to ask them where the music came from. The fact was that about 300 soldiers were billeted near our bungalow. They were on their way to the front and were singing after dinner.

The girls spent some time listening to the music from behind a well and later they went for a stroll to a nearby field. Some tribesmen happened to pass that way. They were about to surround Veena when she shouted, 'Look! The tribesmen are coming.' They dodged the men and scrambled back home. The little daughter of the moulvi also came back with them but the elder one was seized by a tribesman. This girl could have escaped easily because she was the one nearest the house. Sudden fear had probably paralysed her and she did not even attempt to escape. 'I am a Muslim girl. Let me go,' she cried. She recited

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the Kalma to bear out her claim, but the concupiscent tribesmen would not let religion stand in their way. 'You are the daughter of a kafir,' they insisted. Meanwhile her brother and her uncle who lived nearby had both arrived on the scene. But their entreaties too were of no avail and the soldiers seemed quite determined to have their way. Someone ran to the mosque to inform her father and the moulvi limped along bravely and desperately to the scene of the confusion. He said, 'She is my daughter and I am a devout Muslim.' His voice was calm and even and was not heard beyond the nearest circle of onlookers. It lacked the customary ring and aggressive conviction. Probably it hurt the old man to use his proud faith for a minor and private cause. The tribesmen let the girl go and watched her retreating figure with a vulgar look of unappeased desire and ignoble frustration. It was evident that even religious kinship was not enough to hush the voice of desire; this made the ugly promptings of that desire seem still more graceless.

When the girl came into the house her mother began to weep bitterly. As she squalled and snivelled, she abused her husband. She cursed him roundly and snarled out, 'It was you who decided to put up Hindus in this house! That is why my daughter has come to grief now!' Our staying in that house had always been a sore point with the moulvi's wife. Now that there had been some trouble, she was cashing in on it. The moulvi resented the interruptions of his sneering wife while he was luxuriating in innocuous self-pity.

I was, however, feeling guilty towards her. There was some point in her grievance. But for us, they might not have got into trouble. It was embarrassing for me to broach

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the subject with her, so I began cautiously, 'I am so glad that your daughter has come back. I know we have been a great bother to you all. I shall arrange to shift from this house in a day or two.'

I sent word to the Khan saying that I should like to see him, and he arrived, I told him of my desire to leave the moulvi's house. I spoke to the wazir also about this but neither of them would hear of the proposal. They were insistent that I stayed on. But there were more reasons why I did not want to remain in that house any longer. Not a day passed that the moulvi did not remain closeted with the doctor for hours on end. I never had much faith in the doctor and wondered what the moulvi had to say to him. Occasionally, I doubted even the moulvi's goodwill.

Professor Maqbool came to visit me one day. He was now an officer in the new administration. He said, 'Mrs Mehta! How very fortunate you are that our President Ibrahim came to your rescue.'

'What is there to feel happy about?' I retorted.

'Compare yourself with those Muslim women in India who were taken out naked in a procession. You were never treated like that.'

I was not at all anxious to get into an argument. With a lot of time on my hands and with nothing to do, I had of late become highly introspective. So I harangued him at length, 'I am most shocked that such a thing should have happened and it is a shame if it did. Firstly, I can't say that I really believe this story about naked women being made to march in public. If it is true, I certainly understand what they must have felt. When you are in pain yourself, pity for others comes as easily as pity for yourself. When the climate of suffering becomes intimate and personal,

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it also becomes familiar, and one begins to understand much more than one ever did before. When you look at the suffering of others from without, sympathy is bound to be at least partly false. It is only by soulful participation that you develop sensibility, and emotional understanding is complete only when sensibility is keen. And if you decide to take us in a procession like that, I, for one, wouldn't feel very hurt. You see, the body and the spirit react differently to continuous pain. The body at first squirms and writhes but ultimately pain breaks down resistance. After a point, the spirit parts company with the body and feeds itself on the body's pain. It is happy pitying itself—though this self-pity is hardly a very safe substitute for the peace that comes only with genuine fulfilment.' The professor listened to me patiently and was most anxious to reassure me of his goodwill. 'Please don't take this to heart. I am sorry I mentioned the incident at all. After all I owe a lot to you and how can I ever forget your kindness? You looked after my mother when I was away from the place. How fearful that night was!'

'Oh! What I did for you was obviously the usual decent thing for anybody in my place to have done. Please don't mention it; it only embarrasses me.'

The moulvi came to me one day and suggested, 'I am arranging to send you to Rawalpindi. You can live there comfortably till things blow over.'

I was quite emphatic. 'I will not go anywhere else,' I replied. 'I am hoping to move to Chaman Lal's house very shortly.' It was obvious that he did not like the turn of events and he departed thoughtfully. The Khan had advised me to send for him if I decided to shift, so that he could give me protection. I did not, however, let him know

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about my plan. Just before it grew dark, I sent my two daughters over to Chaman's house and we all moved in there shortly after.

We had now a neat, clean room all to ourselves. Though this house had been looted by the raiders, it had not been set on fire. All that was spared were a few broken utensils and one or two quilts. Sacks had been sewn together to make beds for the other people in the house.

Chaman Lal had a big family to support. He lived with his parents and had two sisters. One of them was married and her husband and their son all stayed with Chaman. He had also given shelter to a number of Hindu girls and his house had a few underground cells where they lay huddled during the day. Tents were pitched in the compound to accommodate the destitute families for whom there was no room in the house. The nights were frightfully cold and life in these tents was really miserable.

Chaman's house was situated in the heart of the city and people lived in constant danger from the raiders who frequently returned to loot whatever was left. Nanak Chand, Chaman Lal's father, was a copyist and had been a wealthy man at one time. But now he was reduced to abject poverty. He was, however, on friendly terms with everyone and when he was in need, local Muslims often helped him. There was no sanitation in the house and this made life more difficult. We were frightened of going out, and at night when we did venture out, the dark forms of burnt houses heightened the mood of fear and we walked looking back and forth, our tired eyes searching for the lurking enemy. In the menacing silence of the night our hearts beat faster and our ears were filled with a mounting roar announcing the imminence of danger that had been

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approaching for too long a time. The danger itself had lost all its terror but it was the waiting, the holding of breath for the inevitable final moment, that left us exhausted. The fight had gone out of many of us; we looked forward to the end, which seemed to us to be the only liberation.

Refugees who had been rescued from the holocaust were everywhere. They had nothing to cover their bodies with except bits of sacking and tattered clothes. After some time, the Pakistanis decided to give us rations. Children of wealthy families went out to hawk and earned two or three annas a day, but the Muslims in the city hardly ever bought anything from them. Though many Muslims were heard saying that the Hindus were now citizens of their state and should not be harassed any more, there was, however, not much concrete evidence of this verbal goodwill. There was a gurudwara near our house and several women who had lost their husbands lived in it. Sometimes the tribesmen came there and carried away any woman among them whom they liked. Although the wazir had posted guards to protect them, the raiders had their own way. In spite of the fact that a routine administration was now functioning, there was no semblance of law or order.

Two days later the Khan came to see me. He said. 'I thought I had always been very kind to you, but perhaps you have doubts about me too. Otherwise why should you have left the moulvi's house without telling me? But I respect you a good deal and as long as I am here I shall do all that I can for you.'

I felt guilty and replied. 'Yes, I am very sorry about that. I should have informed you before I came away.'

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I immediately took out my knife and pricked the tip of my finger and made a tilak on his temple with the blood. Then I tied a thread round his wrist as a rakhi, this was meant to be a token of my grateful acceptance of his brotherly protection. Strangely enough, though the tilak and rakhi were institutions peculiar to Hindus, it invariably happened that Muslims were profoundly gratified when they received these from Hindus as symbols of affection. It always satisfied them to feel that they had been admitted to a relationship which Hindus at least partly value in religious terms.

He sat down and wished to hear about my experience. I was telling him how I had most willingly parted with my earrings and given them away to an escort. The Khan insisted on knowing whom I had given them to and he swore that he would get them back for me. I felt that this would not be fair and refused to disclose the identity of the hired escort. My refusal annoyed the Khan and he prepared to leave saying, 'Very well then, don't tell me. I shall find out myself.'

As he was going out he stopped to talk to Nanak Chand, 'It is very kind of you to put up behanji in your house and your son has also been very nice to her. I shall remember that. There are bound to be very many more ugly incidents here. Have you a revolver with you? If you have, pass it on to me and also some of your jewellery.' I did not know why the Khan asked him for the jewellery but presumably he wanted to find out something about Nanak Chand.

The old man replied, 'I am afraid that there is nothing left in this house. The raiders took away whatever there was, and we returned to this house ten days after the looting was over. If you like, you can search the house.'

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The Khan seemed relieved to hear this. He said, 'The moulvi has complained that your son is a Congressman. I think I now know the truth.'

The Khan left soon after and as long as he remained in Muzaffarabad, he was extremely helpful.

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# ANOTHER MARTYR

Our clothes were old and worn out. My daughters patched and washed the few they had, but the boys did not even have a change. I had discovered some cloth which my husband had once bought with the idea of giving it away in charity. I now took it out to make pyjamas for them. The Khan sent for a tailor and ordered him to make salwars. Hindus were accustomed to wearing pyjamas but had now taken to the salwar for fear of the tribesmen. In a salwar it was not so easy to distinguish a Hindu from a Muslim. I had nothing against the salwar, but I did not want my sons to wear one for fear of their lives, for it implied an involuntary and hypocritical acceptance of a faith that they had not chosen. I told the tailor that they must have pyjamas. When they were ready the Khan paid the bill.

I was sitting alone one day and feeling rather listless. I did not notice when the Khan walked into my room. I was disturbed from my reverie when he asked me, 'Why are you so sad?'

'Well, I cannot help thinking of my husband and I haven't even a souvenir to remember him by.'

He immediately left only to return a moment later with one of my husband's old shirts which had been with the dhobi. I was very happy to have it and thanked him.

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Another day, the Khan came back with my earrings. He had found them at last. He asked Chaman's mother to persuade me to take them back. I was quite emphatic that I wouldn't take them back and insisted on his returning them to the man on whom he had found them.

The Khan was very angry, but without any show of temper he said: 'All right, I promise to return them to him immediately.'

There was nothing else to do but the daily chores, and a single day seemed to contain the whole of our existence. The only thing that disturbed the sameness of the routine was the shocking news of Mr Modi's death. His body was reported to be lying in a nullah. Chaman organized a search party and eventually found it. Mr Modi's body had been lying in that nullah for several weeks and it was most surprising that it had neither decomposed nor did it stink; he was in the same old clothes. There was a look of mild astonishment on his face but perfect peace and resignation. It was a depressing thought that the balance and integration that one actively strives for during one's lifetime does not come with effort; it comes only with time. We react with painful self-awareness to the events of our lives and we analyse them with scintillating wisdom. The end, we always realize, is above wisdom, above intellect, above bodily discipline. When we do achieve a semblance of balance, it seems such an unexciting compromise. All that seems to be left of one is a shrivelled and offended ego.

I told Mrs Modi that I was writing to the wazir for fuel to cremate the body. The others did not want me to write to him. They felt that Muslims would not like the idea of cremation and would never agree to it. I thought it

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was worthwhile finding out exactly how much the wazir was prepared to do for us. He, however, sent us sanction for five maunds of fuel. But we were much too afraid of our Muslim neighbours to perform the cremation ceremony. Finally, we decided to immerse his body in the Krishna Ganga.

Afterwards, we came to know how he had died. When the raiders attacked his bungalow his twenty-one-year-old son was in the house. Mr Modi with his wife, Kamla and the two servants had gone to the city and taken shelter in the house of a well-known Hindu. Along with the Modis there were hundreds of other families who had sought protection in that mansion. Having made sure that his wife and daughter were in safety, Mr Modi went out with his gun.

A Muslim who lived in a place called Makri in Muzaffarabad nurtured a grievance against Mr Modi since he had once refused to pass one of this man's bills for road-building. Death now led him to the doorstep of this Muslim. With the help of his friends this man killed Mr Modi and threw his body into the nullah where Chaman had found it. When Mr Modi did not return, his family waited two or three days for him in the house where he had left them. The house was attacked by the raiders who captured most of the men. The women who remained there had no water to drink and when their children cried pathetically for water, unable to bear the agony, they gave them urine to drink.

In order to consolidate their position the Pakistanis auctioned property belonging to the state government and Hindu landlords. The few Hindus who had remained were powerless to do anything in the matter. Their houses and gardens passed easily into Muslim hands.

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The raiders continued to go up and down the road in front of our house. My little son Vimal had formed a children's army to fight them. He showed the other children how to use a bow and arrow and whenever he saw a band of raiders he would look at them fearlessly through the window. He told his 'soldiers' that they were not to hide themselves for that would be a sign of cowardice. The other people in the house teased Vimal and said, 'How will you fight the invaders unless you eat a lot? Let us see if you can eat these rotis!' Vimal took up the challenge and ate as many rotis as a boy of his age would normally eat in two days. Then he quickly gulped down three tumblers of water and tried to look as formidable as he possible could.

The forest ranger came again and it must have been to overawe me that he brought his gun and cartridges along with him. Putting on a very sympathetic look he said, 'I feel so sorry for you. I should very much like to help you. Will you come with me? I have 200 cartridges and Rs 150 on me. Nobody will dare to cross my path.'

I looked closely into his face leering with sensuality. He was abashed by my intent gaze and bowed his head. 'I am very sorry, I can't come with you. Let me think about it, and perhaps I might agree to come with you later on,' I replied.

I looked to see how he had taken my answer but his head was still bowed. He said, 'I see you have no confidence in me. What I am doing is for your good. You are coming with me tonight. I shall come back with a bus to fetch you.' I refused, but he would not listen to me and promised to return at night. While he was away, Indian planes bombed Domel. I do not know what happened to him but he never came back again.

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The Khan was as usual very kind. One day he said, 'I wish I could find the man who killed Mehta saheb. His wife and children should also be made to suffer.' I said to him, 'How can their unhappiness bring me any consolation? It cannot lessen my pain. No, I shall never permit you to kill this man if you find him. It is wrong to blame him for all that has happened.'

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# DEPARTURE OF A FRIEND

One day the raiders asked a few Hindu youngsters to come to the hospital; the boys were told that their rations would be doled out there. It rarely ever happened that anybody succeeded in drawing rations for two successive weeks, and the offer of rations was an event by any reckoning. No man in the town, not one in a thousand, even if he suspected a trap, would have refused to take the risk.

And it did turn out to be a trap. When they arrived at the hospital, armed raiders surprised and surrounded the boys and locked them into one of the rooms. When they did not return for hours, their relatives got worried and went to the hospital to find out what had happened. They were also seized and thrown into the room.

Nanak Chand was preparing to leave for the hospital when he chanced to meet the Khan on the way. The Khan sent him back to his house and told him in a menacing voice that he was not to leave his house under any circumstances.

The next day a sinister silence prevailed over the town. Every man walked with a cautious step and a look of sadness on his face. They made one feel that they were ready and poised to run for their lives. They looked at each other with grave, impassive faces and the lack of

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expression made it obvious that they shared a common fear. Even though one did not ever see people talking, the silent whisper had already passed round.

What I did not know was already news. I heard about it several hours later. The Hindus who had been imprisoned in the hospital had all been murdered in cold blood during the previous night. It was the local Muslims who told the story in graphic terms. There were about sixty men in all; they were taken out in the dark cold night, stripped naked and made to stand in a line. Each one of them was asked to recite the Kalma. There was a tribal woman waiting impatiently at the tail end of the line and when the man had finished the recitation, she closed her eyes and gnashed her teeth and thrust a dagger into his heart with a grand flourish. I could easily imagine the look of affected religious fulfilment on her face; it was universally affected among the other fanatics until it became almost real and convincing. The sight of human blood so heightened the pitch of feeling that they now completely forgot their self-deceit.

One of the men who was killed had been putting up with us in Chaman's house and when his wife heard the news she would not believe it. She was taken out to the scene of the crime so that she could see for herself, and the evidence was unmistakable.

The same afternoon the Khan came to see me and I mentioned the incident to him and asked if he had heard about it. He dismissed the whole thing as fantastic and asked me how I could have ever believed it.

I answered, 'There is a woman in this very house who will remember the proof she has seen of the incident for the rest of her life.'

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The Khan went red in the face. 'Ask your servant to go with me. I should like to see the body myself. These are just interested rumours.' There was a conflict in the Khan's mind. He felt that I would not have asked him unless I knew enough and felt strongly about the incident. Never before had I made it necessary for him to defend himself. In this case, he had a very difficult choice to make. It was difficult to refute me and there could have been no question of his countenancing any part of the story. He left promising to come again in the evening.

He returned in the evening and took Om, Jodha and a few others with him to the scene where the incident was reported to have occurred. After an hour or so, they all came back, and the look on Khan's face showed that he thought he had won a point.

He brought the servants before me and said, 'Ask them if they found anything there.' Even as I turned to face the servants, they declared they had found nothing. Things were going well for the Khan, and he rubbed his hands and said, 'There were only a few drops of blood there and I shall find out tomorrow how those got there.'

The next morning the Khan came again, and told me that he had visited the hill a second time. It was true, he said, that a man had been killed there by an order from the wazir. The story went that Sheikh Abdullah, the prime minister of Kashmir, had imprisoned some members of the wazir's family and was having them tortured. He claimed that the wazir had only made reprisals by sentencing a Hindu to death.

I told the Khan, 'Even if the story about the wazir's family is true, surely he doesn't hope to improve their lot by killing Hindus here.' The Khan however contended

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that Sheikh Abdullah's administration was really responsible for what the Hindus were having to suffer in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir territory. This was in fact an old quarrel between the Khan and myself. I could never convince him that two wrongs never cancelled each other out. One only reinforced the other to add to unhappiness.

The tension in the city continued to hang like a bad odour in an ill-ventilated room. There was another incident. Hindus were taken out in a procession to the mosque and made to recite the Kalma. Hearing of these forced conversions, Muslims from nearby villages openly sided with the Hindus and offered to give them shelter in their homes. Nanak Chand was all in favour of our going to live in one of the villages, but the Khan assured him that he would set everything right.

Hindus continued to be restless and they were promised that their lands and property would be restored to them if they agreed to become Muslims. Om was also of the opinion that we should leave the place. 'It is just luck that we have been spared so far but it may not hold on for ever,' he said. But he agreed to stay on out of deference to my wishes.

A police officer came to the house one day and asked me why I had not joined the other Hindus who went to the mosque to recite the Kalma. The officer knew that the Khan was very considerate to us and I knew I could afford to tell him off. And I did.

One day, while the Khan was in the house, another police officer came to see me. He often dropped in to ask how I was faring but he felt uncomfortable in the presence of the Khan and did not stay long. He, however, returned after the Khan had left and said, 'You don't seem to realize that the Khan is a very dangerous person. It was he who

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ordered the massacre of the people in your bungalow a few days back. Probably you don't know this and if I were you I wouldn't trust him so much.'

'But, tell me, what have you done to look after us? Any number of times in the day, we have to run and hide in the cells. The tribal invaders are taking away women from the dharamshala camp. After all it is the Khan who has made it possible for us to stay here. I appreciate your concern for us but I don't need it.' I could not say what his game was, but I refused to play it.

The police officer had actually been taken aback when confronted by the Khan sitting in my house. I learnt that he was not on good terms with the Khan. When the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir authorities had asked the police officer for information about the forcible conversions, the abduction of Hindu women and the whereabouts of their relatives, etc., he had put all the blame on the tribesmen. The Pakistani officers were indeed as much responsible for them as the tribesmen. It was only the local Muslims of Muzaffarabad who had not been actively hostile to the Hindus. Occasionally, they were even helpful.

I was very depressed to hear one day that the time had come for the Khan to leave Muzaffarabad and he asked me, 'Please give me something I could take home to remember you by.' I told him I had nothing to give but he seemed to have had my husband's *khes* in mind when he made the request. I had often talked to him about it and told him that I had meant to keep it. Now that he had asked for it I could not refuse. I couldn't help the tears which broke through my restraint as I handed it to him. I thought of my husband and I was also sorry that the Khan was leaving. He also asked for a copy of my photograph

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but I had none to give. I thanked him for all that he had done for us. He said, 'I have asked you so many times to go with me to Kabul. From there it will be easy for me to have you sent to India but you refuse to listen to me.'

I could never explain why the Khan had taken so kindly to me in the beginning. It invariably happens that goodness from another person, when it is least expected, surprises you and becomes the basis of an extraordinarily enduring human relationship. I sometimes felt that the Khan was nice to me because he wanted to work off the memory of certain events which weighed on his conscience. He never spoke to me about any conflict in his mind; I could only guess it. He was afraid he might later repent any confidence made at an indiscreet moment. He might have had to pay for it dearly. It was because of his politics and the importance he attached to it that I never got to know him better.

I told him that I would not like to run away when I was supposed to be a prisoner.

'Well, if you must stay,' he said, 'I shall do the best I can.'

He returned the next day with a notice written out in red ink which read as follows:

> No person, either Hindu or Muslim, is to enter the house without permission. The offender will run the risk of the whole kabuli area turning against him.
>
> Aga Jan Khan, *Kabuli Leader*

The Kabulis have always had strong communal pride and loyalty. The red ink signified the colour of blood. He said, 'This should protect you in my absence. There are

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few people here who would dare disregard this.' He then went out and pasted the warning on the door. It was only now when we read his signature that we realized that the Khan was a very important person. He bade goodbye to each one of us before he left.

The police officer had wanted me to believe that the Khan was responsible for the massacre of the Hindus. When he had gone the real culprits were discovered. It transpired that it was the doctor and his men who were responsible.

A month after his departure the Khan wrote to me.

> My dear behanji,
> Please accept my respects. I have reached home safely and shall always remember you and your children. May God bless you! I am Yours etc.,
>
> Aga Jan Khan
>
> *Bannu Kohat*

I wrote back to him but he did not reply. Perhaps our letters were censored. The notice he had pasted on our door proved very useful and nobody ever came into the house. Even after I had left Muzaffarabad, a number of girls took shelter in the same house and were saved from the tribesmen. Nanak Chand eventually brought them all to India with him.

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# EARLY CALLERS

Occasionally our captors were capable of surprising outbursts of sympathy and tenderness. If their captives had a good word to say about them, they could think better of themselves. Most people who do right by others do so to appease the self which likes to feel exalted, but there is also a valid element of goodness and a genuine concern. Several boys from the college at Rawalpindi had come to Muzaffarabad to do welfare work for the refugees. They gave away old blankets and clothes to destitutes and spent a whole day going to every lane and street in the city distributing sweet rotis.

People queued up, eagerly snatching the rotis from the boys and biting off huge chunks as they walked back. Among them were people who had once been so formal that they ate less than their fill when asked to dine at a friend's house.

Om had also taken his place in the queue and walked in triumphantly to announce that he had brought home five rotis. 'That was much more than anybody else succeeded in getting,' he boasted. I was outraged at this and asked Om to go and return them forthwith. Om however saw nothing wrong in taking the rotis but I could not share his lack of inhibition. Om must have thought me whimsical and he muttered under his breath as he left

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the room. He did not mind returning the rotis, but was put out because I had not applauded him for what he thought was a feat.

The next morning I asked Om to go to our old bungalow with Jodha, Mrs Modi's cook. 'Go and fetch some vegetables from our garden,' I said. 'Also find out who is staying in the house and what they are doing.' Om and Jodha went to the garden. and while they were busy collecting the vegetables, they were accosted by a sepoy of the Baluchi regiment.

He asked them, 'What are you two doing here? And who has sent you?'

'This *kothi* belonged to our wazir. His wife sent us here to bring some vegetables from the garden,' Om replied.

The sepoy became inquisitive. 'How many daughters did he have? How old are they?' he wanted to know.

He was rather disappointed that the girls were very young. And he was now very short with the servants. 'Now get out of here and stay out. If you show your face here again, that will be the end of you,' he cried.

Om had by now got quite used to threats and sauntered down the drive as though nothing had happened. But Jodha got the fright of his life. Om then discovered that the chowkidar who used to work for us was still in the bungalow and they started talking to each other like long-lost cousins. Jodha, who had never heard so much gossip in recent memory, looked on open-mouthed and had forgotten all about the sepoy and his threat. The sepoy returned in the meanwhile and informed Jodha that one of the officers wanted to see him. Jodha was frightened out of his wits; he cursed himself and regretted his decision to stay on and listen to the gossip. He was promptly marched

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off to the officer. Om had taken his chance and sneaked away while the going was good.

The officer was suspicious and thought Jodha had probably returned to collect something valuable which I had hidden away in some corner in the house. He asked Jodha, 'Why did you enter this compound without permission? Where is this man who came with you? I shall have you shot if you don't find him.' Jodha searched high and low for Om but could not find him.

Finally he returned home. The sepoy, who also came with him, walked into the house and did not seem to feel at all strange or unfamiliar; he made himself at home and sat before the fire in the courtyard where Chaman's mother was sitting with her daughter. He announced that he had no intention of leaving that place unless Om was found. Jodha decided that he would fear the sepoy less if he sat next to him; he was not afraid of what was going to happen to him. What embarrassed him more was that it was only because of him that the sepoy had foisted himself on Chaman Lal's people.

Not a word was spoken for a whole hour and we sat on; Om did not turn up. Chaman's mother tried to persuade the sepoy to leave; she promised to send Om to them as soon as he arrived. The sepoy pretended not to listen and kept staring into the fire. He was staring with such wide-eyed concentration that it seemed as if the world before his vision was effaced by some enthralling thought which he turned over and over in his mind relentlessly. We all retired to the interior of the house and held a little conference to decide how we could try to get rid of the sepoy.

Chaman was in a fury and stamped his foot, 'Look at these two fools!' he cried. 'For a miserable two-anna worth of vegetables, they have landed us all in trouble.'

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It was I who was really to blame. The vegetables were only an excuse. I was curious to know what was going on in our old home.

I went to the sepoy and told him, 'I sent these two servants to fetch vegetables from our garden. After all, that house used to be ours at one time. Om has not run away from here and he will be back any time now. Why are you wasting your time here? Go and tell your officer that I promise to send the servant as soon as he returns. This house does not belong to me and the people here resent strangers.' The sepoy was wondering if he should accept my assurance and leave; just then Om strolled into the house. The sepoy took Om and Jodha with him and we were all relieved when an hour or so later, the servants returned. The raiders didn't worry them very much; they only warned the servants that if they came to the bungalow again, they would do so at the risk of their lives. At one stage, I had given up all hope for them.

There was a gurudwara in the neighbourhood where a camp was improvised to accommodate Hindu refugees; these were people whose homes had been burnt down and there was not a thing in the wide open world which they could claim as their own. They lived there in herd-like profusion and I sometimes wondered if they were not better off than ourselves. We certainly lived better but it did not do you any good to be isolated in your pain and suffering. That way, you let yourself off easily for overlooking your obligations to humanity around you or even to yourself. Where suffering is the general rule, you are less concerned with yourself; you throw in your lot with the others and do not give in to the temptation of acquiescing in the pain, and you do not revel in the slime.

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Life in the camp was very hard and Muslims from nearby towns and villages came there very often. Invariably each day one of them picked out some Hindu girl whom he fancied and insisted on her getting married to him. It was not the best thing that could happen to a Hindu girl and the harassed parents discovered an ingenious ruse to put the Muslims off; they got their girls married off to boys from the camp. The matchings were not the best possible but it put an end to visits from Muslim bride-seekers. Though Shiva Dayal had not done too badly for himself—he got himself a young widow for a spouse—he went about with a profound look of one who had suffered much for a public cause. He declared at the time of the wedding, 'If by marrying her, I am going to save her from these scoundrels, I don't mind.'

There was a lady in the camp whose husband was missing and who had a child with her. She was living with some of her relatives who did not have enough to feed her and the child. They were wanting to barter her away to a Muslim in return for some grain. But she was quite positive that she did not want to marry him. She came to me for help. Since she knew her own mind, I advised her to be firm and promised to give her some food every day. We did not have much to spare though we had been sanctioned extra rations, but she was only too happy to be rid of the attentions of her suitor.

It was 4 a.m. when I was aroused from my sleep and I heard noises of shuffling feet outside the house. There were a couple of fists thumping on the door. We got together a squad of four people to receive our early callers and the corridor facing the door was lit dimly by an earthenware oil lamp fixed against the wall. As the door

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opened, a file of soldiers marched in. Foremost among them was an officer of the rank of a brigadier. I could not see his face but his uniform shone brightly against the feeble light. I saw only a multitude of uniforms, and the heads had become part of a vast expanse of darkness devoid of all detail. The effect was most weird. For weeks we had been on edge and had spent our time numbering our last days. And a visit from the Pakistanis at 4 a.m. was no ordinary event. We were all getting ready to say our last prayers.

I said to the brigadier, 'Why don't you do away with us once and for all? It isn't pleasant to be kept waiting.'

The brigadier could not help smiling and replied, 'We have only come here with an offer of help. We feel it will be better if you shift to Rawalpindi. We will arrange for the journey and your stay there.'

'I suppose I am your prisoner and have to do as I am told.'

'Would you like to go to India?' one of them asked me.

'Not just yet, I should like to stay on for a while.'

The brigadier said, 'We had hired a few buses to take you all there. But you don't seem to trust anybody.' And then they all left the house.

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# FAREWELL TO MUZAFFARABAD

The whole town was agog to welcome Chaudhary Abdul Hamid of Jammu who had now gone over to Pakistan. People from the villages had also been asked to come to listen to his address. We had just finished lunch when Chaudhary Abdul Hamid and some other officers came to meet me. Among them was Kachru Ahmed Shah of Ladakh valley who had been a revenue officer in the state government. When the tribesmen invaded Kashmir he gave up his job. He was now working as a revenue officer with the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir government. Durrani was also with them. After exchanging the usual formalities, Chaudhary saheb expressed his sorrow at the death of my husband.

I had begun to resent people who condoled with me. So I cut him short. 'Why are you sorry? I think I deserve to be congratulated. Very few women are given to be proud of a husband like him.'

He said, 'If Mehta saheb had permitted me to go to Jammu, my children would be alive now.'

'I am very sorry about all that happened. But aren't you being unfair to my husband? You know he was only carrying out orders.'

'I would like to help you,' he offered. 'I am prepared to take you and your children to the Jammu border. I shall

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be able to get some of our own people who are detained there in exchange.'

Durrani insisted that I should agree and he offered to come along with me. I told him that I was ready to go but I could not leave behind Mrs Modi, her daughter Kamla and the servants. Chaudhary saheb said, 'It is impossible for me to take so many people.'

'Then I am afraid we must all stay here. I can't leave them in the lurch.'

He discussed the point threadbare and finally he was too tired to argue any more. He agreed. Hurriedly we packed our few belongings and after an hour Durrani came back for us. There were eleven of us—my five children, Swadesh, Kamla, Mrs Modi, the two servants and I. All the people in Chaman's house were in tears when they bade us farewell. I knew they were going to miss us terribly. We had felt secure in each other's company and now they would have to weather the storm alone. We walked down to the road where the bus was waiting. The moulvi had heard that we were leaving and had come to see us off.

We were soon driving out of Muzaffarabad. I recognized the bus driver. I had travelled in that very bus so many times from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad. I asked him if he remembered having brought me to Muzaffarabad only two months ago but he was most unfriendly and reluctant to enter into conversation. Very brusquely he said, 'Are you going to Hindustan? The Indian army is suffering from smallpox and you will see what is going to happen to them.'

At every bridge the bus was stopped and a sentry made the routine enquiries: where was the bus going, who were

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the passengers. Only when they were convinced that it belonged to the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir government would they let it pass. Some of our fellow travellers were Kashmiri Muslims and they were good to the chidren. When we reached Garhi Habibullah, in Pakistan, a big crowd had collected to hear Chaudhary saheb speak.

We waited in the bus and Durrani warned me, 'If anyone wants to know who you are and where you are going, please don't say anything. Let him speak to me, but if you must say something, tell him you are my sister and are on your way to my house.'

On the road from Garhi Habibullah to Abbotabad we met many tribesmen who stared at us as the bus went past. At the dak bungalow in Abbotabad we could not get a room as the whole place was swarming with tribesmen. We were finally taken to a hotel in the city. A room was booked for us and Durrani ordered dinner. We all slept comfortably that night and spent the next day in the hotel. Chaudhary saheb had a busy programme for the day and when it was over in the evening he asked us to get ready to leave for Rawalpindi.

On the way, Durrani asked the driver to stop the bus in front of a house; he told us that his relatives lived there and he wanted to leave some of his luggage with them. He asked us, 'Wouldn't you like to get down and meet my people?' One of them had been a colonel in the state army and he had had a very bad time in Jammu before escaping and coming to this place.

We all went into the house. An old man was smoking his hookah on a couch and two old ladies were sitting close by him. In one corner of the room sat a young girl, while a young man in uniform was pacing up and down. We sat

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on the carpet and Durrani made the introductions. The old ladies wanted to know where we were going. We told them that we were on our way to Rawalpindi. The two women looked at each other very knowingly. 'The tribesmen will not spare the boys,' said the old colonel, voicing the unspoken fear of the ladies. He added, 'Five thousand Muslims have entered Jammu and they are sure to take it over from the Hindus. They will now suffer the same fate. Do you know that one of my sons is still missing?' The memory of his son brought tears to his eyes.

The women only laughed. Suffering had so hardened them that they now mocked at it. There was something uncanny and false about the way they laughed. The children were frightened and we left the house. What the old ladies had said about the tribesmen killing my boys rang constantly in my ears as the bus travelled towards Rawalpindi. We stopped at a camp for Kashmiri Muslims. They had come there from India. We were told to stay in the camp for a day or two and then we would be taken to the Jammu border to be exchanged for Muslims from India. We went into the camp which had been the DAV College and were given a room.

Durrani and Chaudhary saheb then went away promising to return the next day. We were a little afraid of the strangeness of our surroundings. The Kashmiris in the camp were anxious to make us feel at home and were genuinely affectionate to the boys. A man came to our room and said, 'I am a Hindu and Mr Mehta was a friend of mine. One of my Muslim friends and I are in charge of this camp. We shall have your rations sent to you.' He sent some food for the children and fruit for Mrs Modi and myself. In spite of all that he had said, I was not convinced

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that he had spoken the truth. I went off to sleep as I strained my memory trying to remember this man. I had a feeling that I had never met him before.

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# THE KASHMIRI MUSLIM

The first thing I saw in the morning when I woke up was the figure of a sentry with a rifle on his shoulder pacing up and down the entrance to our room. My eyes were all screwed up and I could only see his dark silhouette against the grey sky. His heavy-nailed boots clattered on the stone floor with monotonous regularity, putting me back to short spells of sleep. I woke up again to find him momentarily out of sight and heard the click as he turned back on his heels. He walked the routine beat with a supremely purposeless determination. The rays of the still submerged sun appeared at intervals in red patches in the fresh morning sky and looked like festoons suspended from nowhere at all. This was the first time in weeks that I had lingered so long in bed, luxuriating in after-sleep freshness. I was not so much on edge now and the future which had seemed so static and so much a part of the present had begun to move. It was like a lazy ponderous animal shifting slightly and with the merest suggestion of movement getting ready to be aroused from its sonorous slumbers. The past was losing its hold on memory. I got out of bed feeling strangely elated and wondered if it was really because I was looking forward to the rest of the day.

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We were sent a liberal supply of milk, ghee and other rations. I learnt that there were several Kashmiri Muslims who were kept in the same camp and some of them came to see us. They said, 'We have also gone through hell. We are very happy to have you here. It does our heart good to see people from our own country.' They barely mentioned their difficulties. There always seemed to be a marked disinclination among fellow-sufferers to discuss their problems. It was perhaps the baptism of suffering that admitted them to the mystic faith which was best shared silently. It was too sacred to be bandied about in vulgar conversation.

In the camp, there were two young Muslim boys who hailed from the place of my birth. In fact, they used to live very near my father's house. I recognized them at once, and they greeted me very cordially.

'How is it you are here?' I asked them. They had been in a college at Jammu and they told me that they had to leave the place for fear of communal riots.

'But there hasn't been any trouble in our home town. And I hope there won't be any in the future either,' I remarked.

'We hope so too,' one of them replied. 'In Kishtvad we have never had any communal problems and they are not going to start now.'

Politics, when it attempted to generalize the attitude of simple people like these, always sounded unreal. Their home town, its environs and its people were among the few traditions that these people valued and understood; it commanded their immediate affection and respect. In fact, it was about the only social concept which produced the intimacy of feeling in their minds. One often heard or

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read about communal passions that flamed high. People invariably talked about it as though it were both a social and individual attribute. But these Hindus and Muslims that the politician theorized about lived in small communities. Generations of native genius and simple friendships sustained by common interests had gone into making their community socially and emotionally self-sufficient. They had probably never heard of the commandment about the duty of love they owed their neighbour; it came to them naturally. Religion, apart from its routine institutions, was to them an abstraction. Anything that was not felt manifestly in the immediate layer of consciousness was not real. It was as though they had to feel an idea with their flesh before they could take it in. But the politician was impatient and he distorted truth in the process of modifying it. 'Islam is in danger,' he warned. 'Your mosque, your namaz, in fact your children and your property are all in danger of being destroyed.' His logic was not clear. You did not know how one followed from the other. And in the end he had his way. The social upheaval he worked for had been achieved, but the people who paid a dear price occasionally realized (they only had the glimmerings of a doubt) that the danger had never been there. It had been brought about.

'Where do you live here? Whom are you staying with?' I asked the boys.

'We live in this camp. This has been opened for the benefit of Muslim refugees. There are three hundred of them living here now. We are the only ones who have come from Jammu. This camp is being run by Mr Reddy and a Muslim friend of his. Every morning we have a drill and are taught the use of a rifle. There are some

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Kashmiri Muslims from the Pakistan army who are in charge of the training.'

'I am very happy about this camp,' I said. 'It reminds me of the good old days. People here are not at all conscious of their religion.'

'We owe all this to Mr Reddy. He is a very nice person.'

'Who is Mr Reddy? Tell me more about him,' I asked.

'He used to be the editor of a newspaper. The Kashmir government banned his paper and he was expelled from the state. Both Hindus and Muslims have real respect for him.' I suddenly remembered the man. He had once been arrested at Muzaffarabad on his way to Rawalpindi. The colonel had wanted to take drastic action against him but my husband had stayed his hand.

Later, Mr Reddy also came to see me. Vimal and Suresh had gone for an outing with him and they were ecstatic when they ran in to announce that Mr Reddy was arriving. Mr Reddy had bought them both a pair of shoes each, and for Suresh, also a pullover. All these days he had been badly exposed with only a shirt on. Mr Reddy had also taken the boys for tea and given them nice things to eat. The boys were nervous because they were afraid that I might disapprove of their accepting presents from a stranger. I thanked Mr Reddy and told him, 'But you shouldn't have bought us these things. I find it very difficult to accept them.'

'Please don't be formal,' he replied. 'After all, Mr Mehta was such a good friend of mine. Moreover, their feet were in a bad way. I heard about your sad experience, and felt very sorry to hear about it. May I suggest that you shift to our house? We don't know yet when it will be possible for us to send you to Jammu. In the meanwhile, I don't

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advise you to continue living here.' Mr Reddy stayed on for a while. I consulted Mrs Modi. At first she did not relish the idea of staying with a stranger but I persuaded her to agree.

I was not very sorry that we were not going to be taken to Jammu just yet. I was quite happy among these Kashmiris and the Muslims here were such a welcome contrast. I heard a lot of news from them about the invaders—how they entered the state and how the Indian army wrested Srinagar from the hands of the raiders at the proverbial eleventh hour. Most of them had not seen much of the raiders; their knowledge of rape and arson was only hearsay. Some of the Muslims asked me if I knew anything of their relatives in Muzaffarabad. I said to them: 'You can't imagine what it is like there. They don't spare even the Muslims. In fact several of them have been killed because of their affiliations with the nationalist movement.'

For the first time these people felt insecure on the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir side. They asked me about Sheikh Abdullah. I said, 'You know as well as I do that he is fighting together with India against the raiders. I think he is a fair-minded person and he has indeed no communal prejudice.'

I had not miscalculated. I had worked on the assumption that most of them had been taken in by the guile of the raider government. They looked around furtively before they hissed in my ear confidentially, 'We too should like to fight for the freedom of Kashmir. But you know what it is.'

Mr Reddy arrived with a bus to take us to Poonch House. The words 'Azad Kashmir' were brightly painted

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on it and inside was an American soldier in uniform and he wore a long khaki turban which sat grotesquely on him. Poonch House was very spacious and an emergency administration was functioning there. There were several lorries and motorcycles kept in readiness and people were huddled in a room working away busily under the glare of powerful lamps. An American brigadier and a Muslim gentleman were staying with Mr Reddy in the same house. Life here was comfortable and we had a nice hot bath; in three months I had almost forgotten the smell of good soap. It was quite exhilarating. And there were three courses to our dinner. We sat before the fire and warmed our clean hands. For a long time now, I had not known such pure, simple pleasures. We fell asleep in our chairs.

The next morning a number of Kashmiri Muslims who worked there (they had known my husband) called on us and some of them brought little presents for the children. Durrani and the American brigadier also came. They assured me that it would now be possible for us to leave for Jammu in a day or two.

Towards the evening I had another important caller; it was Ali Ahmed Shah, the defence minister of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. He had known my husband very well and was now in a reminiscent mood. He talked about the times they had spent together and lamented the evil days on which Kashmir had fallen. 'We have certainly known better times,' he said. It was obvious that he was sincere about what he said because he had almost forgotten that he was as responsible as the next man, even if only indirectly, for 'the evil days'.

Mr Reddy was also present. I told them both that I had a favour to ask of them. There were friends of mine in

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Muzaffarabad whom I had promised that I would do the best I could to get them out once I got through myself. Mr Reddy readily agreed and took down their names and addresses. He would try, he said, his very best to have them rescued. But, Mr Reddy reminded me, I should not give up the battle once I was safely back in India. I was just more fortunate than the others whom I was leaving behind and I owed them a duty. The Alibeg camp at Mirpur was in a bad way and they needed money, lots of it, to keep it going. Would I try and collect funds from India and send it to Mr Reddy? I promised that since I was getting away so easily, I would never forget my duty.

Everybody had taken it for granted, including myself, that it would be a matter of days before we reached India. The American brigadier wanted a souvenir; he had a camera with him and took a snap of our group. His bearer had looked after my children with so much affection that they had even put on a little weight and the colour had returned to their pale cheeks.

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# BACK TO JAIL

We were not at all uncomfortable at Poonch House, but I could not help being anxious to know what was in store for us at the Jammu border and beyond. Durrani came to see us after six days and he assured me that he hoped to leave for Jammu the next morning. Mr Reddy and the brigadier were too busy to go with us, but there were to be eight other Kashmiris in the party besides Durrani.

The journey to Jhelum bridge was long and colourless. As our bus tore through the deserted road, I looked out emptily at the world that we were rapidly leaving behind without regrets. The vegetation which rose in sheer defiance of the bitter cold held no charms for me. The mind, drunk deep of the body's torture, was sick and wanted to become even sicker.

The bus slowed down as we reached the outskirts of Rawalpindi. Even before the bus had stopped, we were mobbed by a whole crowd of tribesmen. They thronged around Durrani who tried in vain to push them out. Some of them climbed on to the roof and declared they wanted to be taken to the front. They settled down there with the righteous look of outraged passengers who had been made to wait too long at a bus stop.

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Durrani tried very hard to explain that the bus was already full and in any case he was not going to the front. One of them pulled out a gun. 'If you leave us behind, you shall have corpses for passengers,' he said, and was highly pleased with his own joke. The crowd continued to swell. The crowd, like all others, was curious to watch an argument to its finish. The bystanders looked on with the peculiar relish of non-participants. Their attitude was violently partisan, but as part of a crowd their interest was surprisingly non-attached; to them the virtue of the victor had no meaning in moral terms.

There was a sudden hush as a police officer entered the scene. He called out to Durrani. 'Where are you going?' Durrani was confident that the loudly painted name of `Azad Kashmir' would do the trick. 'I thought it was fairly clear that this bus belonged to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir government,' he replied. 'We are taking some people with us to the Jammu border.'

'I am afraid you cannot do so without written permission from the commissioner.'

Durrani thought the police officer was fussing about nothing at all and said, 'We refuse to be detained here. We don't need to have anybody's permission. We have been working for the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir government for months now.'

But the police officer insisted that there were fresh orders and we could have them verified from the office if we liked. We all drove to the office and one of our men went in to enquire about the orders. I saw him coming back with a dark frown. So, I concluded, Jammu, if at all, was not yet to be.

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He climbed into the bus and said, 'These people are impossible, they are so suspicious. For the time being we have to return to Rawalpindi. Even if we get the permit from the commissioner, we will need a lot of luck to reach the border by tomorrow.' I knew it was much worse than that. The plucky voice was merely put on for my benefit. He did not want the rest of us to lose heart. Durrani did not return with us, but promised to come the next day.

We drove straight to the commissioner's bungalow. One of the men went into the commissioner's room. When he returned he was swearing fluently in his native dialect. 'These people are treating us like a pack of thieves. We have done so much for them, still they don't trust us.' He rushed to a nearby telephone and rang up Mr Reddy, who arrived there shortly after on his motorcycle. The two men talked to each other for a long time and they finally decided that we should return to Poonch House.

When we returned to the camp, more sentries were posted to guard our rooms and the brigadier made his rounds throughout the night. The stillness, for which I had so loved the place, had departed. There was so much tenseness inside us and now it was around us also. The sentries were extra cautious and every now and again, one of them stopped dead to listen to a sound he could not hear. Mr Reddy told me in the morning that someone had put them wise about a raid planned by the tribesmen. Anyway, it did not come off.

Mr Reddy assured me that the permit would be ready within a day or two. Three days went by and we were still waiting. Mr Reddy gave up all hope. He said, 'I don't see how you can go to Jammu now. Mr Qayyum, the prime minister of Peshawar, is going to be here today and I shall talk the matter over with him. It may be

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possible for you to go to India through Peshawar. I am sure he will be able to help.'

In the evening when Mr Reddy was going to see Mr Qayyum, he asked Vimal if he would like to go too. 'You say you are not afraid of the invaders. Come, we'll show you one.' Vimal was only too happy to go off on a spree. Mr Qayyum, however, did not think it would be possible for him to oblige.

Meanwhile, news came through that the Pakistan authorities had ordered our detention in jail.

During the brief respite at Poonch House, I had been listless, feeling that all this was too good to be true. Like the smell of distant rain, trouble seemed to lurk in the air ready to fall upon us at any moment. It was as though you were changing in a cosy dressing room getting ready to go with your executioner. Yet when it did actually happen, I was not prepared for it. Mrs Modi looked at me with accusing eyes as if as to say: 'I knew all along that this was bound to happen.' They all felt that I was in the habit of trusting people a little too easily. Chaudhary saheb and Durrani had not put in an appearance. In the beginning it was I who had tried to force the pace. If it had come off, that would have been glory for me. Now that the scheme had fallen through, they found fault with it.

Mr Reddy looked upon the whole thing as a personal defeat; somehow he felt responsible himself. The jail lorry came to fetch us. There were six sentries and two police officers. They looked very cool and casual as though they had come to collect some old furniture. Mr Reddy brought us a bag full of rations and put three minutely folded ten rupee notes in my hand and closed my fist. I was embarrassed by this kindness but I knew that if I accepted the money,

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Mr Reddy would feel less responsible about our being sent to jail. But I wished to be permitted to return the money as soon as I could. His servants had also been very helpful and I was wondering what I could say to them without exciting the routine farewell sentiment.

One of them, a Muslim, edged his way through the crowd and addressed the police officer. 'Saheb, please look after mataji and see that none of them is ill-treated.' His politeness was very rustic and brusque.

The officer was amused by this bravado. 'And what is it to you how we treat them?' he asked.

'Oh don't you know? She belongs to our place.'

Mr Reddy looked very pleased that his work had not been in vain.

I still did not know what it was that Pakistan had against us. We were being sent to jail without being informed as to what we were guilty of. Much later I learnt that Pakistan intelligence had informed the authorities that I was putting up a number of Kashmiris to defy the new regime and that they had divulged military secrets to me. In the circumstances, therefore, I could do a lot of damage if I went over to India. This was a little too thick. The people in Poonch House certainly were not very well informed, and their secrets would not excite the most infantile mind. In any case, one would have thought that Pakistan's military secrets were kept securely. It is true that I did talk to people who were enthusiastic about Sheikh Abdullah's regime. In fact, hoping that I would get through, they had given me several messages to be conveyed personally to Pandit Nehru and Sheikh saheb.

Our lorry pulled up in front of the jail and the courtesy of the police officer who showed us in seemed ridiculously out of place. And he announced with a benign air of one

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who was conferring a favour, 'You will be put in B class but I am afraid your servants can't stay with you.'

'In that case we should like to stay in the same ward as the servants,' I told him. I knew that if the servants were separated from us, we would never set eyes on them again. He led us to an inner courtyard around which a garden had been laid out. To one side were four rooms with a veranda in front and these were given to us. The rooms were clean and the flowers added a touch of absurd elegance. We had hardly moved in when the police officer asked me to hand over all the jewellery and money I had on me. 'You can have them back when you are released,' he added.

It was now exactly three months since my husband had left us. In remembrance I fed some fellow prisoners in our rooms. The same day I heard that Bapu had gone on a fast for better relations between India and Pakistan. Some of the officers, however, made use of the news to taunt me. 'You see, your country is in two minds. Even your own people realize that India is being unfair to Pakistan.' I dared not tell them that those in power in Pakistan could be very unfair without any self-reproach.

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# NIGHTMARE

We had been in jail for two weeks and I did not hear of any more ugly incidents. I brooded over the thought that I had let down friends at Muzaffarabad by coming away. Nor could I shake off the longing for the end of pain, as visions of Jammu assailed the tired mind. Then saner moments returned, and all this thinking seemed a luxury. With Jammu to look forward to and Muzaffarabad to feel guilty about, existence had merely found a means of justifying itself. It was just another way of seeking some adequacy in life.

The inspector's face was beaming when he walked in. 'Cheer up! There is happy news for you,' he said. 'You are leaving for Jammu today. Please get your things together.'

I had been thinking about Jammu for so long now that the thought was beginning to turn stale.

At 4 p.m. a station wagon arrived for us. Before we left the jail the inspector returned my jewellery and the money. We drove to the commissioner's bungalow. We were asked to get into a bus of sorts. The coach was a closed one with no ventilation of any kind and it was teeming with humanity. You jostled, elbowed and squeezed before you deposited yourself in a narrow gap between two passengers. The air was redolent with hope which was

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there in every heart and on every face. But I was only aware of the rapidly spreading odour of stale sweat as the door of the coach closed.

My fellow passengers were all Muslims and among them I recognized one who had come with us from Muzaffarabad. I asked him the 'why and wherefore' of our co-passengers. His answer was not to the point; instead he told me a long story about the officers in the bus and their relatives. 'One of them is a minister of Mirpur, and his brother is the prime minister of Peshawar. There is a superintendent of police also.'

The window panes of our lorry were covered with blinds and our convoy was on the move. First went a motor car followed by a truck full of soldiers, our bus and another lorry trailing behind. We spent the night at Jhelum.

'When shall we arrive at the Jammu border?' I asked my co-passenger from Muzaffarabad in the morning. I was struck by the answer he gave.

'And who said we were going to the Jammu border? We are going to Mirpur,' he said. For a moment I thought that this man had guessed that I was anxious to reach Jammu and was only teasing me. To make sure I asked to see the deputy commissioner.

'Where are you taking us?' I asked him.

'To Mirpur of course,' he said nonchalantly.

'This is a very dirty trick. We were given to understand that we were on our way to the Jammu border.'

'You are not being deceived,' he said. But he was not very anxious to discuss the subject and added, 'Perhaps you don't know me but I was a judge in Kashmir. I had heard in good time what was going to happen and sent my family to Peshawar. I am sure Mehta saheb also knew. He should have done the same.'

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'Excuse me, but Mehta saheb had very strong views on the subject. He felt that by sending us away he would be letting down the people whom he was supposed to look after. He thought we should also face the music with the rest of them. That, I am quite sure you will grant, is one way of looking at it.'

I could not say for certain if he ignored the edge to my voice or failed to notice it. He only said, 'Take it from me that you have nothing to worry about. I suppose you have heard that the Alibeg camp is hell on earth. We shan't put you there. There is a contractor at Dutiyal, he is a man of means and he has given up his huge rambling house for the benefit of rescued women. You are prisoners of the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir government and therefore could not be kept at Rawalpindi. And going to India from Dutiyal should be quite simple.'

While the minister was talking to me I noticed Veena was peering into his face. She had recognized him and said, 'Your daughter was in my class. Where is she now?'

'They are all in Peshawar. Everything is going to be all right for you, my child. Don't worry.'

I found it very difficult to tell Mrs Modi that we had not turned the corner yet. I rather felt like a petty thief who was making up his mind to own up to his first crime. I told her about my conversation with the commissioner and added, 'I don't know what trouble lies ahead of us. I am sorry to have brought you away from Muzaffarabad.' Mrs Modi was not very encouraging; she remained silent. She probably thought I had not repented enough.

When it was quite dark we started for Dutiyal. The truck was piled with quilts and we sat on them. We sped into the unknown and the bus tore through the strong wind

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with an eerie howl. The children clung to each other to keep their balance and the smaller ones were so bewildered that they began to weep. Every now and then the driver jammed on his brakes to avoid groups of tribesmen sprawled out along the road. They shouted at the driver as they made way for him.

When at last the truck stopped, the minister who had been travelling by car came and said to me, 'Dutiyal is only two miles from here and the rest of the road is not motorable. You will have to walk now. I am sorry that I cannot come with you but one of my men will take you there. Oh, but your servants can't go with you. Men are not allowed inside the camp.'

I told him that under no circumstances would I agree to be separated from the servants.

He gave in. 'All right,' he said. 'I shall have to make an exception in your case. When Mangalbhai's family was sent to the camp the jagirdar was not permitted to stay with them and had to go to Alibeg camp. Later he was found murdered there.'

We collected our few belongings and walked away from the main road. A narrow footpath led through wheat fields. Our guide whispered, 'You mustn't make any noise here. Walk as softly as you can. The peasants mustn't know that we are trespassing. If they do, I can assure you they won't give us a warm reception. They are a bad lot.' Luck was on our side and we tiptoed stealthily as though we were stalking some big game. I started when a dry twig crackled under my foot and the guide looked back every now and again; I felt that he disapproved of my quick and heavy breathing. We walked about two miles before we arrived at the camp and a sentry let us in.

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The building stood almost on the road and we found ourselves in a dimly lit room. It was more like a warehouse for human beings loaded beyond capacity. Some of the women were squatting on their haunches with eyes closed as if to dispel all consciousness, others sat with their heads buried between their knees. In the corner of the room a woman was putting a crying baby to sleep with a contrite look in her eyes that besought heaven for mercy and the end of all creation. The few fortunate ones who were merely bored by pain were asleep on beds of hay. One could all but see the foul blue air that hung heavily in the room. It was like a cloud one could almost rub shoulders with while motoring up a mountain.

A whole battery of eyes turned on me. Some of the women were too full of themselves and gave me a casual once-over. Others stared at me as if to see my innermost self. Except for a few, they were all very young but their youth had lost all vitality. There were dark rings under their eyes. An oil lamp flickered in a gust of draught and the pale light played on their gaunt faces. The flesh seemed to have come off them and they looked like skeletons.

They wondered as they looked at me. Would I make a good fellow prisoner? I was the newcomer who had to be told what she was in for. Incidentally, I would be a willing listener and they needed one badly. They were waiting with fingers crossed; it was with fear rather than hope, for they did not chafe and fret. One of them explained that the tribal invaders had got to know that there were women in the camp and had made a number of attempts to break in. I looked around; they were living in such squalor that an epidemic might break out any

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moment. After a point, no one bothered to keep the place very clean. They looked unwashed, their hair and clothes were full of lice and I could even see the insects crawling on the floor. They ate hardly anything besides rotis made of bajra which were hard to chew and blistered the mouth.

The excitement of my arrival had passed and some of the women started reciting the Kalma. The change that had come over them was frightening. All their lives they had been Hindus and lived in orthodox Hindu homes. And now they recited the Kalma with a strange defiance; rather like someone who having once wallowed in the mud now flaunted her lowliness; she saw no other way of accepting herself and in retaliation she splashed you with the slush.

They felt deprived and conversion was the wrathful visitation of their offended god on the undeserving. They had fallen from grace and felt less than themselves. Islam was willing to have them and they hung on to it desperately. They affirmed their faith in the new religion with a violence full of fear but they still did not feel whole. They secretly longed to be restored to the holy communion with their old faith and wanted to be contained by it. The forced conversion made them feel rejected. They all felt like a woman turned out by a husband whom she loves with a mystic fear, who throws herself into the arms of a lover whom she neither desires nor understands. It was a desperate need for belonging, for value in one's own eyes.

I learnt that the workers of the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir government also had an eye on the women and they visited the camp at odd hours, but the camp commander queered the pitch for them. The commander was a tall man and looked about fifty. The years had

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treated him well and he had a benign air about him that immediately made one feel reassured. I had heard nice things about him and he was called Thekedar.

Obviously he had known about me and greeted me with a friendly smile. He said, 'So you have also been brought here! I wish you didn't have to come. I shall certainly do all I can but let me warn you that life in this camp is far from easy. The tribesmen are very frequent visitors and it is all I can do to keep them away. This is an extraordinary place in many ways and we have some of the most good-looking women here. Their Muslim husbands are after them and they would stop at nothing to get their wives back. Strangely enough the women also prefer to go back to them.'

I interrupted him and said, 'But they are not in a normal state of mind and you don't seem to have taken that into account. Their mind is torn between love and fear. They are afraid of being ostracized and think it would be safer to go back to their Muslim husbands.'

'I see what you mean. As far as I am concerned I shall do my best so that they can choose without fear. The Pakistan government have not given me enough men to guard the camp. You can well imagine what it must be like for me alone in this wilderness with so many women on my hands. Now let us see where you are going to stay. The first floor is full. This room is near the entrance and not very safe but you sleep here tonight. I shall have the room next to mine vacated for you tomorrow. It is getting late and I must be going now.'

Our room was full of luggage. The servants piled the trunks in a corner and spread hay on the floor for us to sleep on. When darkness fell, I was afraid for the first

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time. I found myself going over the gruesome details of the stories I had heard in the afternoon. They were now part of my own experience, so intensely did I live them in my imagination. I changed the characters in my dread and impersonated them in this sordid drama. Then I woke up from the nightmare with a start.

Earlier in the day when I met the women, I only understood their situation. Now I had *lived* their lives. I felt grateful that I could actually sense their pain. It felt good to be able to weep over someone else's troubles and made my own problems seem so unimportant. It seemed that I was not down on my luck yet and I felt it was my duty to do something for them. I must try and bring them back to their normal state of mind.

In the evening two college boys from Govindpur came to visit the camp. They were social workers and one of them was the nephew of the minister of Mirpur.

'Why are you so unhappy? And your eyes are so swollen,' he said me.

'Do you think anybody could be happy here? Just have a look at the women in this house. They have no clothes and all that they get to eat are two rotis. They are able to sleep out of sheer exhaustion. Did you expect to be greeted with a salvo of applause?' Occasionally, you had to whine about your troubles, and in this case it worked.

The boy seemed to feel uncomfortable and his eyes avoided mine. He said, 'Forget all that has happened. We have come here to look after you. I know conditions here are very bad but if you knew what it was like at Alibeg camp, you would consider yourselves lucky.'

'But there are things you could easily set right. The guards are very rude to the women. And then you could

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certainly give them some clothes and sheets.' The commander was also present. He sent for the guards and threatened to shoot them dead if he heard any more complaints. When the minister came to the camp on an inspection visit he distributed new quilts and took back the old ones.

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# FEAR OF OSTRACISM

The camp commander took his work seriously. He was an administrator but had a refreshingly human attitude to the problems of the inmates of the camp. It constantly worried him that all was not well with the camp and he needed someone to talk it over with. About four miles from Dutiyal was the village of Govindpur, the district headquarters of the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir government. Most of the officers and policemen were tribesmen. They had been appointed to keep a check on the raiders who were fellow countrymen, but they could do very little to maintain order. The raiders robbed the local Muslims and killed their livestock for meat. The officers were much too scared to intervene.

One evening the commander remained longer than usual and spoke to me at length. He said, 'Most of the women here do not want to be sent to India. The others are of course very anxious. All of them will now be officially questioned and their statements recorded in the presence of the deputy commissioner. Those who don't want to make a home in India will be returned to their Muslim husbands from whom they were recovered. Something strange and terrible has happened to them. They no longer seem to possess the ability to choose. These women used to live well at one time. They have been

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well brought up and have refinement. Now they have come back after living with very common people. They were not used to such people. Most of these men were coarse; they treated the women as though they were property from a windfall. The fight has gone out of them and they have become cowed down. I wouldn't be so unhappy, if they at least realized what they were choosing when they returned to their new husbands. I wonder if you could make them realize that they shouldn't burn their boats for fear of being ostracized by sneering orthodoxy.' I promised to do whatever I could to help him.

I called all the women together and told them that a prayer meeting would be held every morning and evening and I should like them all to attend. Some of them welcomed the idea. Others said, 'But we are not Hindus anymore.' I explained that singing hymns would not mean that they had recanted. I assured them that I was not interested in reconverting them.

I was clear in my mind as to what I hoped to do. They had lived alone with their grief bottled up inside them and it had seared their entire being. They needed to talk freely and forget. They had become so morbid that in the company of others who had suffered similarly, they remained isolated, each weeping tearlessly over her own dead image. They had no time to be sorry for others. I was in fact surprised at the number that turned up at the meeting next day. They strained their ears, only too eager to go away disappointed so that they might not have to come again. I spoke briefly, 'I once met a sadhu called Maganbaba in Srinagar. He taught me a few songs. Their theme is not particularly religious. You will feel, even as you sing them with me, that they cheer you up. Before long, you will learn to forget.'

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They repeated the words after me. There was neither harmony nor melody. Their voices were jerky, full of suppressed tension. But I felt, perhaps because I wanted to believe it, that the lines in their faces relaxed a little, their eyes flickered and the empty stare disappeared. They crowded round me and were almost friendly. They had forgotten their unconscious resolve not to part with their grief and even started talking about it. I squatted on the floor in the centre and made them sit round me. Their narration, strangely enough, did not excite pathos. For us who sat there, suffering had a flavour of something already tasted and understood. One had to expand on the horrid details to sound real and it left a bad taste in the mouth. There was one woman who had lost her husband, her children and parents. She was aching to unburden herself. One evening the raiders had surrounded her village and taken it by surprise. They destroyed with barbaric frenzy and ceremonial thoroughness. The men hid themselves in their houses, in the kitchen, under the bed. The raiders rummaged round, helped themselves to the money and the clothes and dragged the men out of their hiding. The assassin's axe landed on their prone figures with a thud. The raiders forced the swooning women to stay watching. 'A kafir's life is not worth the six annas you have to spend on a bullet,' explained the despoiler and his friends guffawed. The murderer rushed through the ceremony of marrying the kafir's wife, the wife of a husband whose blood was still warm. 'I cannot bear it any more. I wish I could stop hearing that guffaw,' said the woman and stopped her ears with her fingers. The coarse laughter oppressed her burdened memory like the strains of some sadistic music and it died languidly away, only to return again and again.

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We met every morning and evening and gradually the women became aware of the world outside and the humanity therein. I felt grateful when I occasionally heard the women remarking on the nip in the air or tittering at a private joke. Some of them told me that they looked forward to the meetings, and as time went by conditions in the camp improved. Even if we did not get as much as we required, we had better food to eat. We did not sleep between clean sheets, but neither did we sit shivering through the night. The night-watch was strengthened and when we turned in after the day, our sleep was more peaceful.

Women continued to stream into the camp and swell our numbers. Very often they were surprised to find other women who had faced exactly the same problems. I now know why most of the women acquiesced in the prospect of returning to Muslim homes. Their Muslim husbands had browbeaten them into believing that all talk of their being rescued and taken to a camp was sheer bluff. They were made to believe that they were being taken away only to be handed over to other tribesmen. If they did at all get to India, they were bound to be looked down upon, they had said.

The newcomers were difficult to deal with. They made themselves scarce at the meetings and I was anxious that the scepticism should not spread. I tried very hard to infuse a glimmer of hope in their lives. I told them that it would be wrong for them to resign themselves to the prospect of unhappy lives with their Muslim husbands only because they were afraid of the future. But once I had given them a start, they recovered quicker than the others.

The guards bore a grudge against us because I had earlier complained to the commander about their misbehaviour.

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When he was not about, they were rude to the women and made them do more than their normal share of work. Most of the women, who had been used to servants and a leisurely life at home, resented this and complained to me. They wished that I would speak to the commander about it. I told them, 'But this is not drudgery. Actually, I feel better every day after tidying up my rooms. After all, it is we who live here and the house looks so dismal and dirty. It will do you a world of good if you could make up your mind to do some work instead of brooding day in and day out.' So every morning we swept the floor, cooked and scrubbed. They agreed with me that they felt much better after it.

The Muslim women from the village often came to our camp and engaged us in long spells of conversation. They were extremely jealous of the Hindu girls who had been brought into their homes since their husbands no longer took as much notice of them as before.

I told them, 'If I were you, I shouldn't be so helpless. This arrangement suits no one but your greedy husband whose lust seems to be insatiable. You should try and stop such marriages. Your homes are being broken up by unwilling intruders and there is peace neither for the first wife nor the second.' They readily agreed with me, returned home and kicked up a row with their husbands. And they regularly disclosed the whereabouts of other abducted Hindu girls. A posse of soldiers set out every morning and returned with at least four or five girls whom they had recovered during the day. The camp commander was very understanding and had he not given me a free hand, all this would have been impossible.

Though life inside our camp was relatively safe, the neighbouring villages were still a happy hunting ground

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for the invaders. Every few days, detachments of tribesmen stopped at the village on their way to the Naushera front. After the day's looting and burning, they caroused till the small hours of the morning. They never cleaned up a village; they always left enough for a second round. Even before the semblance of normal life was restored, more tribesmen arrived to claim a share of the spoils. There was nothing amateurish about them and their methods were like those of a seasoned sadist.

One day, in the village outside our camp, a skirmish ensued between a party of tribesmen and the local Muslims. Though the odds were heavily in favour of the raiders and the villagers were easily put to rout, they managed to kill one of the tribesmen. The raiders thereupon decided to camp in the village and swore to kill everyone in it before they left. They killed all the cattle, had the granaries emptied, and ate it all up in three days. The villagers went to the local police force for help but they were too scared to intervene. The matter was reported to the central government who finally had the raiders despatched to the front. This was only one of the several incidents and the women in the camp quaked with fear when they heard these stories. Thekedar did not receive much help from the central government but did all he could to make us feel secure. He went round from room to room assuring everyone that there was nothing to fear as long as there was any fight left in him.

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# TO INDIA AT LAST

Some Muslims from the mohalla in a neighbouring village came to the camp with clothes and money. They had asked the camp commander for permission to distribute them to the girls who had lived with them before they were rescued. The camp commander was of course suspicious, but he could not turn down an offer of charity. He knew that the clothes were just an excuse for meeting the women. Some of the women accepted the clothes and agreed to listen to the endless gibbering of the men. High-sounding words, mawkishly sentimental, were bandied about recklessly.

The men were all in a flutter; their facade of goodwill and humility seemed ludicrous. Desire burned in them like a wild fire but it could no longer be appeased by their Muslim wives who had a disgusting odour of familiarity about them. So they told the Hindu women how they had pined for them and how noble and exclusive was their love for them. They swore to turn out their first wives and pleaded with them to return and live a contented life. The men promised to behave well towards their new wives and to deck them in the choicest of fineries.

Theirs was the impatience of lust but they hoped that these women would accept it for sincerity. But the women were only amused, some of them even snickered. Cool

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and composed, they heard their suitors to the end. They felt secure in Thekedar's keeping; therefore, they firmly refused to return to the raiders and announced, 'We all hope to go to India very soon.'

The raider-husbands were in a paroxysm of rage. They wondered where the women had got this strength of self-assurance from. As the flesh was deprived of its appeasement, their religious conscience was outraged. 'So the kafir's daughter wants to go to India. Let's see how far she will get!' they hissed.

In the meanwhile, news had got around that I had been talking to the women. They readily concluded, therefore, that I was the evil genius. Ramping and raving, they stormed into the deputy commissioner's office. When they realized that there was no way of laying their hands on me, they demanded that I should be detained in Pakistan for the rest of my life because I was out to destroy the bliss of their new married life.

And then they thought of another ruse. They whipped up excitement in the village by telling people that the Hindu women in Pakistan were well looked after, whereas Muslim women in Jammu were in rags and had to dig trenches at the front. The gullible villagers were easily taken in and started kicking up a rumpus. The camp commander came to my room, his mind assailed by doubt. He had gone out of his way to be kind to the women in the camp. The solitary right doer, he felt lonely in his virtue and thought his goodness inexpedient. He told me, 'Don't you see the whole village is against me? I have done everything I can to make life easy for all of you, but do you know how Muslim women are being treated in Jammu?'

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Without looking at him, I said, 'This is a little too thick. If I were you, I wouldn't take them seriously. They are desperate because they can't get the Hindu women back. I for my part am sure that Sheikh saheb wouldn't let such things happen.' I did not know if he was convinced. Probably, he fancied himself as a righteous person and went away, but the villagers did not stop harassing him from time to time. One day a district officer brought some wheat infected with pest and some boiled rice that smelt badly. Showing it to the commander, he said, 'You insist on our sending these women rations of good quality. See what our women in Jammu are given to eat.'

One day a Hindu girl of fifteen was recovered from the house of a soldier; she was taken to the deputy commissioner along with her husband and her uncle who had become a Muslim. Frantically she kept on repeating, 'I don't want to go to the camp. The women there are Hindus and I am a Muslim now.' Om was there at the time and the deputy commissioner asked him to take the girl to the camp. She screamed wildly and refused to go. 'I won't go to India nor will I eat anything cooked by you,' she whimpered.

The women tried to make her see reason but she took no notice of them and continued to weep. She wept more like one retching violently and with every heave of a sob she seemed to throw up the self-disgust within her.

I persuaded her to go with me to my room and told her, 'Nobody is forcing you to go to India. It is entirely up to you to decide where you want to live.' Like a pampered child she now quietened down. She sat huddled and moping in a corner of the room, and her veins stood out like whipcords. She required no pity; on the contrary, she seemed to resent it. Grief at her humiliation festered

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in her heart and tortured her. She felt her spirit could never be blithe again. There was no joy that could warm her heart, but existence had to have a purpose, and grief and despair served just as well. They filled one's thoughts and the aggressive humility gave one a fiendish energy. When I spoke to her again, she looked up at me. Tears were still streaming down her cheeks. The violent loss of faith had passed over. 'Would you like to stay with me?' I asked. 'My girls will be so pleased to have you keep them company. Come, I must tell you their names.' She nodded assent and followed me in a docile manner.

I asked her to tell me something about herself. From her looks I could tell that she was well bred. This was confirmed when she told me her father's name. She came from a well-known family. When they ran away from Mirpur her father got separated from them; she along with her mother and two younger brothers were seized by the raiders and taken to Alibeg camp. There one of her younger brothers was trampled by a camel and died in agony. She could not say more and her frail young body trembled like one who shivers violently in disgust at an ugly sight. I had raked her memory and her spirit squirmed at having to face up to the grief which, together with a feeling of impotency, had humbled it. Her provoked ego ran amuck and her will merely played its handmaid; it was as if she herself had become an intruder on their privacy, a helpless victim of their joint decisions. A displaced lock of hair had fallen on her forehead and as I settled it, I softly stroked her head.

She went on with her story, 'At the camp we saw terrible things. The men were taken to the banks of the canal and their heads were struck off with an axe. It was

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all so casual. There was no violent rage nor regrets. Girls and women were taken by Muslims to their homes, and when the men were tired of them, they sold them to the raiders for twelve or thirteen annas like so many crippled cattle which had outlived their use.'

It was the same old story. On their way to the front the raiders invariably stopped at the camp and there ensued an orgy of atavistic sensuality. They did not like to be reminded of their vulgarity and coarseness and anybody who did so was shot dead. The children had very little to eat and were always asking for food. When they did get some of the awful rations they had attacks of diarrhoea. 'My mother couldn't bear the life in the camp any more, and one day told a soldier that she wanted to go away from there. He happened to see me and forced me to go with him. When he told his wife and parents that I was also going to live with them, they were furious. The women in the house were probably aware that their men had wearied of them. It was true that Muslims could have more than one wife, but one could always set up a whine about the other woman being a Hindu. They misquoted the scriptures that had been handed down to them by word of mouth and demanded that the infidel be removed from the house and sent back to the camp. But this man took me to another house, lived with me there for a while until I was finally rescued.'

Sudha, as I shall call her, threw her head back as if to avoid a disturbing thought and ran her fingers through the tousled hair on her temple. It was not out of vanity, but by this gesture, I felt, she was trying desperately to efface the memory of the past. It made me realize almost for the first time that people needed to think well of

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themselves. Vaguely, at the back of her mind, Sudha felt that she needed confidence to be able to live. One had to come to terms with one's ego; it was no use pretending that it did not exist. It was in pain that you were most aware of your ego lurking furtively in the background, nevertheless working incessantly; it was in fact the real power behind the scene. Compromise with the self was of course possible at various levels of detachment.

'What happened to your mother? Is she still in the Ali beg camp?' I asked her.

'No. A farmer took her away from the camp and was pestering her to marry him. She resisted him for a few days. With nothing to look forward to and disgusted by this man, she set herself on fire. By the time the farmer returned home, but she had already been badly burnt. He no longer had any use for her and brought her back to the camp.'

When some trucks came from Jammu to fetch women from the camp, her mother was among those to be taken away. She was later sent to India.

Then I asked her, 'Would you like to go to India and meet your mother? You could go with me.'

She flared up when I mentioned India and her nerves left her exhausted. I had to tread more cautiously now because I found that weakly, but desperately, she still resisted the idea of being helped. She started crying and said, 'You are also like the others. You don't wish well of me either. What do you think will happen to me there? They will drive me out of India. It is more probable that I may never reach India. They will hand me over to the tribesmen.'

Her Muslim husband had convinced her that the best that could now happen to her would be just a change of

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husbands. The prospect horrified her and that was exactly what he wanted. She had wanted to stay on with her Muslim husband. The horror of her first Muslim husband was at least partly relieved by familiarity! She couldn't bear the idea of going through it all over again.

But the going was easier now. She was young and impressionable and she accepted all I said without question. She said she was willing to go wherever I took her. In time, she settled down to the routine of the camp. I was aware of an overpowering affection whenever I looked into her eyes. I could not quite fathom my feelings and was not sure if I pitied her, which I did not want to. My daughters took very kindly to her and we came to look upon her as one of our household. Her husband visited the camp every day and sent her letters constantly imploring her to return to him. When he found he was being ignored, he ran to the guards and shouted at them to drive her out of the camp. He just could not accept the idea that Sudha was lost to him. When he came to know that she was under my care, he sent me messages threatening me with dire consequences if I did not send her back to him.

No one left the camp, and new people were always coming in. One day the deputy commissioner brought some people who had been converted to Islam. Among them was Gokulshah and his wife and children. He was from Mirpur and had been fairly well known there. The raiders had killed one of his sons. The fact that he was now a Muslim and under the safe custody of the Pakistan government did not make the slightest difference. No one dared to stop the raiders when they broke into the camp and carried Gokulshah away; they tortured him and

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demanded that he disclose the spot where he had stowed his money away. The poor man had given up all he had; he put up with this manhandling patiently and denied that he had any money left. When he returned, he sidled about feeling very self-conscious about his scars and even when he stopped to speak to someone he fiddled about trying to hide them. It was just that he did not want to evoke pity. He was extremely helpful to others but hardly ever mentioned his own problems. He told me about himself only once and even then he talked of it very casually.

Gokulshah had a daughter who had just left school when the trouble began. After her conversion she was made to marry a man called Sayeed. At the end of two months her husband felt he had had enough of her and decided to pass her on to the highest bidder. Scared of having to live with a stranger all over again, the girl implored Sayeed to let her stay with him. But Sayeed had made up his mind. The young wife had in the meantime learned to handle a gun, and finding herself alone in the house one day, she shot herself through the temple. When Sayeed returned home he found her body lying across the threshold. He was happy that she had thus solved his problem though he felt cheated out of the money he might have received for her. He dumped her body outside his house for all the villagers to see. They were horrified, but when they mentioned it to him, he only said, 'It serves the daughter of a kafir right!' Sudha and this girl were only two among the many other women who had all suffered equally.

We received news that the Indian army was advancing. We were looking forward to the day of liberation. Yet one did not know what the Pakistanis might do as they

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retreated. One day the deputy commissioner's son rushed into my room to say that Mahatma Gandhi had been assassinated. I do not know of any other incident which made me despair so completely. My resistance, my hope for the future seemed so pointless. My attitude to Pakistanis had been so self-righteous, because I was convinced that we as a nation were in the right and were being wronged. It was my self-righteousness which had given me hope and it was men like Gandhiji and Pandit Nehru who inspired this feeling. It was only a few days ago that Gandhiji had gone on a fast to bring about a reunion of hearts of all communities. What a terrible shame that he should have been killed! I knew that the assassin was a mad man and his was a lone voice in my country. Yet, I felt that he had let me down as well as the other Hindus in detention in Pakistan. We had held our heads high through suffering and pain. Even the deputy commissioner's son was visibly moved.

At long last, the time came for us to leave for India. The doctor and a few others who had become Muslims were however asked to stay back. They came to my room and pleaded that even though they were converts to Islam, life for them would be safer in India. I spoke to the camp commander about this and sent him to the deputy commissioner. They finally agreed to let the doctor and his friends go along with us.

With so many young girls and women in our company, the prospect of the journey frightened me. The camp commander stopped me as I was walking past him and whispered, 'It's a good thing that you are taking all these women to India but you must be careful on the way. I have heard that a soldier and one of the police officers

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have plans to kidnap the two girls you have been looking after.' I thanked the camp commander most profusely and when I took leave of him all I could manage to say was, 'I am very sorry to have to part company with a friend.' I was glad he realized that it was an understatement.

I made the two girls undo their long plaits. Their hair now fell on their faces in cascades. They wrapped two old blankets around their body and over their heads and waddled along in the darkness looking like tubby old women. And it was dark.

The Pakistani soldiers peered into every face as the women filed past them but they did not know the girls they were looking for had already gone by trembling under their blankets.

Out in the open, we had to walk across the fields to reach the motor road. We had got away with it in the first round and I found the air most bracing. A number of trucks were waiting there and two women and a man, all Red Cross workers, were there to see us off. As the women climbed into the trucks, I counted them one by one. There were about 180 of us including the men and children. I had decided to sit in the last truck with the children, Sudha and the other girl. The drivers were all Muslims and there were a few soldiers on guard in every truck. We had hardly got going when our truck was stopped. Before we knew what the matter was, two men climbed into the truck. The driver knew them and they had been on the lookout for him. One of them looked like a farmer, the other was a soldier in uniform.

The girl sitting beside me gripped my hand in terror and said, 'You must save me. It is him—my husband. He is here.' In the meantime he had settled down in the seat

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next to the driver. Every minute I expected something to happen and there was nothing I could do to save the girl from the soldier. But the bus continued to wind along the road. The soldier suddenly turned round in his seat and faced me. 'Do you know all that I have gone through because of this girl? My whole family is now against me. But I should like her to do what she chooses.'

His voice startled me. He had come to the point foremost on his mind without ceremony. But it took me a few moments to shake off my own thoughts and understand what he was saying. It was with immense relief I realized that he had no violent intentions towards the girl. The man was really in love with her. This was the only heartening thing which happened after Gandhiji's martyrdom to revive my weakened faith in humanity. During the past few months, at several stages I had been so desperate that I all but lost faith in people and eventually even in myself. Apart from losing all hope, there was also the egotistic fear of being proved wrong in one's choice of values. 'Yes, I know the whole story,' I answered. 'If there were more men like you, many girls would have been saved. But for you this poor girl would not have been on her way to India tonight.' As I spoke, I looked intently into his eyes to watch his reaction.

We must have gone quite a few miles before he spoke again. It was pleasant to hear him reiterate his sentiments, to be told that it was all true. He again asked me to take the girl to India and see that she was properly cared for. He suggested that I should hand her over to her mother. He then asked the driver to stop the bus and both he and the farmer got out. I looked round and saw him watching us with a tender look and no regrets.

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At Sarai Alamgir we boarded a train that was already full of refugees from the Alibeg camp. Mrs Modi, the girls, Vimal and I were in the same compartment. Suresh and the servants had got separated from us. There was no light in the carriage and we could not see how many others were in it. Soon after someone struck a match and I saw that all the berths were crowded. With difficulty I was able to find seats for Mrs Modi and the children. We spent hours cooped up in that dark compartment. The train was due to leave at 4 a.m. Slowly the moon came out of hiding from under a dark cloud and by its cold feeble light, I could see the vaguely defined features of people near us. I recognized the jagirdar's family from our camp. One of the women was sitting beside my daughter Sheila. She held a small baby in her arms. My gaze travelled to the far corner of the compartment, stopping every now and again to recall a familiar face. Suddenly, the silence was broken by a woman's scream. It was the woman sitting next to Sheila. I turned and saw a man pulling at her arm. 'Let me hand over the baby to someone. Then I shall go with you,' she wailed. His grip relaxed and suddenly jumping away from him, she hid herself under a berth. The man was a Pakistani soldier and he was furious at the trick she had played on him and he caught hold of my arm. I felt a sharp prick between my ribs and saw the gleam of a dagger. Two angry eyes stared into mine and a guttural voice said, 'Tell me where you have hidden her or I shall stab you before you can say your last prayer.' He held the unsheathed dagger very near my face and it had an oily shine against the moonlight. His eyes now fell on the girls huddled in the other corner. Pushing me out of his way, he walked across to them. Pointing at them, he asked, 'Whose girls are these?'

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'Mine,' I answered.

Just then he saw the woman he had been looking for hiding under the berth and dragged her out. Her mother put her head out of the window and screamed.

The man lost his nerve and ran away. I decided not to think about the incident. I wanted to think of India. Soon, it was dawn and the train was racing along to Amritsar. A new day, and I hoped a new life, had begun for us.

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# AN INTERVIEW WITH PANDIT NEHRU

As we approached Amritsar, the train turned around a bend and I looked out of the window. I could see anxious faces dotting the entire curve of the long train down to the bogie at the tail. As the station approached, the train slowed down and clanked forward heavily. As it pulled up, everyone in my compartment rushed out to have a peep at the platform, but I deliberately continued to sit on my bunk to heighten my suspense. I sniffed the air to imbibe my new freedom. It was good to be back in one's own country. It meant freedom from fear and indignity, and for the first time in months, I relaxed.

There was a crowd of people—friends and relatives, social workers and executives from the camp where we were all going to be stationed. They were all smiles and were most affable. They got busy receiving the refugees as they alighted from the train. They worked with thorough precision and flitted about from one carriage to another, and in a few minutes all of us were taken care of. They had brought us things to eat, and there were sweets and fruit in profusion. These were passed around, and the food soon disappeared. Nobody bothered how much they ate—we were hungry and we were being entertained by people whose hospitality was acceptable. In contrast, I

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remembered the dismal faces of the women in the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir camp when the warder went on his daily rounds doling out the food. I was hungry too, but found myself lingering over the food. I realized I wanted to arrest and preserve the flavour of the exalting moment in my palate and I knew why. I felt I had already assimilated the past, its pain and contumely. The spirit was too proud to give in to the bitterness of the body, and, in retrospect, the loss appeared a necessary part of experience. Only the relatives who had come to console rather spoiled the festive air, and I resented them for raking up the past.

I heard that all the refugees from Kashmir were being sent to a camp at Kurukshetra, the famous battlefield where the Pandavas and the Kauravas had fought a bloody war under divine auspices; justice was re-established on earth and the Bhagavad Gita bequeathed to posterity. I was not very keen on going there myself and wanted to stay in Amritsar for sometime, but I knew nobody there who might put me up. Just then, one of the women executives from the Kurukshetra camp walked up to me, 'Aren't you taking the train to Kurukshetra?' she asked me. When I did not reply, she gathered I was not anxious to go and added, 'There is a camp in the local college under my charge. Since you seem to prefer staying here, I shall try and keep you for some time. But I have to write to the authorities for permission. If they turn down your case, you can stay as my guest.' She introduced herself to me as Bibi Sant Kaur. She looked about forty-five, and was a very well-spoken person. I bade my co-passengers good bye and promised to go and see them at Kurukshetra.

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We were given a room adjoining the one in which Bibi Kaur lived, and she had thought of every little thing to make us comfortable. This camp had both Hindu and Muslim women. Abducted Muslim women were recovered and kept there before they were handed back to their relatives in Pakistan or India. Similarly, abducted Hindu women who had returned from Pakistan were also put up there until they went back to their relatives. Orphans were maintained at state expense for indefinite periods. The camp was strictly guarded, and maid-servants kept everything spick and span. The women were were given milk and fruit regularly. The camp authorities had organized classes in embroidery, sewing and knitting. There was a cinema hall in the premises where we went to see a film twice a week. Life was fairly comfortable, but the women continued to be listless.

Bibi Kaur informed me that a train carrying refugees from Muzaffarabad was due to arrive at about 4 p.m. She was going to the station, and I offered to go as well. We reached there early and as before, the arrangements for receiving the refugees left nothing to be desired. I was very happy to meet several people from Muzaffarabad whom I had known intimately. Chaman Lal was also among them. They were in Amritsar en route to Kurukshetra. Chaman Lal and I compared notes before he took the train. Conditions in Muzaffarabad were certainly not improving. Mrs Modi went away to Srinagar to stay with her son.

A few days later we left for Kurukshetra, and Bibi Kaur gave me a letter of introduction to the camp commander, Colonel Puri. Colonel Puri received us warmly and gave us a tent all to ourselves. There were about two lakh refugees in the camp. It was very easy for me to adjust myself to

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this life. I was happy to be back with the same people I had known in better times—Shiva Dayal, Chaman Lal and a host of others, all from Muzaffarabad. Colonel Puri was always busy with the affairs of the camp, and his wife and two daughters helped him with odds and ends. He also made it possible for me to do some useful work in the camp.

I must say that the congenial atmosphere in the camp was most conducive to relaxation. There was no feverish talk of war, and fear did not make people ugly; the women did not indulge in exhibiting their feline traits. Among the political leaders there was a quiet determination to face trouble ahead and put an end to it, but in the camp itself, by tacit consent, no one mentioned the aggressor. There was no sermonizing but everybody was made to feel that beginning afresh was the most important thing. When we were in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, the prospect of a jehad was terrifying, but here the word only made us laugh. It seemed nobody in India bothered to pick up the gauntlet.

I had asked for permission for an interview with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and was hoping to go to Delhi for the purpose. But one day, Colonel Puri informed me that Pandit Nehru was coming to the camp and he would see me.

Pandit Nehru came. I was ushered into his presence. India's prime minister was seated on a sofa and for a full minute, I stood speechless before him. I was not overawed but did not know what to say. Strangely enough I found myself silently going over the details of my experiences of the past few months. It happens very often in the presence of an acknowledgedly superior person. You are reassured by his silent understanding. You do not have

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to make an effort because so much is taken for granted. You can always hope to be judged by what you don't say.

I was pleasantly aroused from my reverie when I heard him say, 'Won't you sit down? And tell me something about yourself.' It was a very sweet voice and I now knew why so many who went to hear him returned inspired with hope.

I told him the story in broad outline and when I mentioned my children, he said he would like to see them. He came to Colonel Puri's house in the evening for tea, and at his invitation, I drove with him to Delhi in his car. I was given one of the guest rooms to stay in. Pandit Nehru had been out to dinner and when he returned he saw me. He said, 'Krishna, you should now look upon yourself as one of our family. I shall arrange to have the children sent to school.'

After a week, I went to Kurukshetra and brought Om and the children back with me to Delhi. We stayed there for over two months and Mrs Indira Gandhi was extremely kind and solicitous. The children were sent to a school in Nainital. In May 1948 I accompanied Pandit Nehru on one of his visits to Kashmir, and there he found me some work to do. A *sadan* was started to train refugee women from Kashmir in domestic crafts and they had regular lessons in hand spinning and embroidery. My brother, who was on leave for six months and had come to see me, helped me a good deal. The response was not heartening at first, but within six months the institution made rapid strides and it made living possible for over five hundred women. Three branches were opened, one each at Baramula, Habbakbad and Chhatti Padshahi. A montessori school was started in the sadan for destitute children. A hospital was also put up and was run by the staff of the Indian army.

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It was about this time that I heard my sister Laxmi had passed away. She had also been in Kashmir and her husband had been killed during the raids; Laxmi never recovered enough to survive the shock. They had left behind three children. I had lost much else besides my husband and Laxmi, and my memory had a few other ugly scars. But I felt better for what I had been through. I was grateful to have been able to understand and sometimes even respond to other people's suffering, and that is perhaps the only lasting cure for self-pity. I was grateful to have been amidst situations and people that humbled me without leaving a bitter taste of defeat.

I particularly remembered two incidents in Thekedar's camp. Even now, I could at will visually recapture the scene of a woman with a sick baby in her arms. Completely oblivious to pain within and without, and of the danger to herself, she tended the child. The other was how Thekedar insisted on looking after a woman who was laid up with acute dysentery. He would not even let me clean her room and he brushed me aside with an apology muttered under his breath. It was not that he was not sure of himself; humility came to him genuinely and naturally, and he never bothered to analyse his satisfaction.

Of such people, no writer or psychologist dare claim to have said the last word. One can only be proud of having had the privilege of knowing them. But I have so much to remember, not merely people like them. So many incidents and such variety of people crowd my memory. It is indeed something to have come through all this, to have experienced so much in this short span of time.

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HINDU EDUCATION SOCIETY KASHMIR
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## COURAGE AND DIGNITY IN THE DARKEST OF TIMES...

The raiders who barged into Kashmir in October 1947 had more than territory on their minds. As they advanced, they left behind them a trail of dead, many of them women who killed themselves to protect their honour. Krishna Mehta's husband was district commissioner of Muzaffarabad, and he was away repelling the attack when the marauders reached their home. Six children in tow, Krishna escaped to find safe shelter. Over the next few days and nights, hungry and thirsty, she and her family moved from one house to another, turned away from each by their hosts after a day or so for fear of the raiders. Finally the raiders caught up with them—and it was in captivity that Krishna realized the full horror of the situation. Yet, she never yielded. In the end, even her captors, pitiless thus far, were so moved by her spirit and dignity that they took it upon themselves to protect her, cutting across religious divides.

*Kashmir 1947* is a portrait of a woman fighting for survival in an extreme time. Set during the dark days in Kashmir when the state was under siege, it is a gripping account of courage and resilience, all the more fascinating and powerful because it is entir

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ISBN 0-14-400017-2
9 780144 000173